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ROCK ART AND CIRCUMCISION IN SONGO, DOGON COUNTRY (MALI)

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Credits and Acknowledgements

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Preface

The village of Songo is located in a picturesque position between three hills on the Bandiagara plateau, in the land of the Dogon. Thousands of tourists visit this village each year because of its famous rock paintings. Every three years a circumcision ritual, lasting fifteen days, is performed at the rock art site Kondi Pegue at Songo. In the course of this ritual existing motifs are re-painted and new paintings are added. Successive renewals of the paintings result in alterations to the form of the motifs. This change has been an on-going process since the site was first used, probably in the second half or towards the end of the 19th century.

Since the beginning of the 20th century these paintings have attracted the attention of ethnographers, art historians and archaeologists. On the basis of nearly one hundred years of photographic documentation, it is possible to follow the development and change taking place at this rock art site over the course of the 20th century.

1. Introduction

Rock art in the world

Rock art has been documented on all inhabited continents. The term 'rock art' describes both paintings and engravings on natural rock surfaces. It is used here out of convention and is not intended to imply any aesthetic or value judgement in the sense of Western art traditions. The terms 'rock paintings' or 'pictographs' refer to drawn, painted or printed imagery on rock surfaces, while scratched, incised or abraded marks are referred to as 'rock engravings' or 'petroglyphs'.

In Europe rock art is known from all ages of human settlement, the earliest dating to the Old Stone Age, the Palaeolithic. The elaborate Palaeolithic paintings in the caves of southern France and northern Spain with their bison, horse, deer and mammoth motifs, and their mysterious 'signs', are widely known. These sites count among the oldest known rock art, with paintings in the recently discovered Grotte Chauvet dating to more than 30.000 years ago (Clottes 2001). The apparently Palaeolithic petroglyphs of the Côa valley in Portugal, which depict wild fauna such as horses, ibexes and aurochs, have only recently been recognised. In contrast to the well-known cave art, the imagery of the Côa valley is found on open-air rock surfaces (Martinho Baptista 1999). Rock art of an equally early or even earlier date is also to be found in other parts of the world. On the Australian continent, for example, rock engravings have been dated to more than 30.000 years ago (Flood 1997). Australian rock art of later periods encompasses hand stencils, zoomorphic, anthropomorphic and geometric motifs, as well as contact period imagery.

Instances where rock art has been made until recently and where a living memory exists as to the significance of the motifs and the circumstances of rock art making are of great interest for an understanding of prehistoric rock art traditions. For example, in some instances aboriginal Australians attribute meanings to seemingly simple geometric designs: circles could signify a camp, a ceremonial ground, a fireplace or a female breast (Layton 1992). Australian Aborigines also interpret some rock art as scenes from their legends and myths, in this way linking the Dream Time with today's world. Such ethnographic information is only available in exceptional circumstances, however. Most rock art remains silent.

Rock art in Africa

Ethnographic information on African rock art is rare. Southern African rock art is thought to have been made primarily by hunter-gatherers, the ancestors of today's San peoples, often referred to as 'bushmen'. Anthropomorphs and zoomorphs, such as the eland antelope, the giraffe and elephant are most commonly depicted in paintings, while most geometric designs and animal tracks are engraved on rock surfaces. This art has been interpreted in the light of ethnographic information on San customs and myths (Vinnicombe 1976; Lewis-Williams 1981). It has been suggested that southern African rock art depicts visions and sensations experienced during three successively deeper stages of trance (Lewis-Williams 1989). The human nervous system generates a range of geometric shapes or 'entoptics' in the cortex of the eye when entering trance. It is claimed that some geometric motifs in southern African rock

art resemble such 'entoptics'. The deeper stages of trance are characterised by visions of more figurative shapes, such as (often deformed) anthropomorphs and zoomorphs. Trancers have likened their physical sensations during trance to the feeling of drowning. Other common sensations in trance include hair standing on end and the elongation of limbs. Some of the narrative art of southern Africa appears to depict such trance visions and sensations: anthropomorphs with elongated limbs, 'blood' coming from their noses, their bodies bent over or performing somersaults, or deformed animal shapes. This interpretation of southern African rock art, appealing though it may be, has its critics (see for example Solomon 1992). Although it is based on San ethnographic data on trance practices, there is little direct information to support the idea that the San were indeed depicting trance visions and experiences as rock art. Rock art ceased to be created long ago in most regions of southern Africa and it is possible that in the past San groups have depicted a variety of themes, and made rock art within a wide range of contexts.

Rock art in the Sahara is thought to have been created by a variety of groups over a period of several thousands of years (Muzzolini 1995). As in southern Africa, the narrative art of the Sahara, with its scenes involving human and animal figures has been more thoroughly studied than geometric art. However, the subjects represented, and the reasons for their depiction, remain unknown. The ancient occupants of what was once a fertile zone disappeared with the desiccation of the Sahara. Ethnography might provide an indirect link to the significance of some of the pastoral rock art. Some of this narrative art seems to depict customs similar to those of the pre-Islamic Fulani pastoralists (Hampâté Ba & Dieterlen 1966). No direct information on the creation and significance of Saharan rock art is available, however, except in the case of *tifinagh* writing of the Tuareg nomads. While Saharan and southern African rock art are the most widely known rock art regions in Africa, paintings and/or engravings exist all over the continent. A multitude of diverse rock art sites have been reported from the Egyptian Eastern Desert, the Horn of Africa, Eastern, Central and West-Central Africa.

Rock art in sub-Saharan West Africa

Sub-Saharan West Africa is often excluded from accounts of rock art in Africa. Previously, few sites were recorded, and none exhibited evocative narrative art compared to the sites in southern Africa or the Sahara. Geometric motifs, schematic human and animal figures have been described as most typical. Mostly the schematic motifs are 'stick figures'. Some resemble horse-riders or lizards. Such motifs have been reported from Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Ghana, Togo and Mali (Breunig & Wotzka 1991; Vaughan 1962; Carter & Carter 1964; Eiwanger 1991; Zeltner 1911; Huysecom 1990a and b; Huysecom & Mayor 1991/1992; Huysecom et al. 1996). However, recent investigations in southern Mali suggest that this picture of rock art in sub-Saharan West Africa has most probably resulted from a lack of research, rather than from any real absence of paintings or engravings. Southern Mali, for example, has a rich and extremely varied rock art heritage, comprising a multitude of different motifs, from geometric pictographs and petroglyphs to handstencils and 'tracks'. Recently, the first sites with narrative art, comparable to paintings in northern and southern Africa, have been documented (Kleinitz 2000 and 2001). The age of this rock art is as yet unknown. Yet, it appears that rock art in this region may date back several millennia. The creation of rock art has ceased in southern Mali, as in most other regions of Africa, but there is at least one site in sub-Saharan Mali where rock art painting is practised today and where information as to its context and meanings can be gathered: the circumcision site Kondi Pegue at Songo in the land of the Dogon.

Rock art at Songo

The Dogon of the Bandiagara escarpment in what is today central Mali were brought to the attention of the Western world mainly by Marcel Griaule's publications, such as *Masques dogons* (1938), *Dieu d'Eau: Entretiens avec Ogotemméli* (1948) and *Le renard pâle* (1965, with Germaine Dieterlen). They have been the subject of a multitude of further publications since (see bibliography). Popular books on the Dogon rarely miss the opportunity to include a brief mention of the rock art at Songo, a village on the Bandiagara plateau. In the course of a circumcision ceremony taking place every three years, polychrome paintings on a massive vertical rock wall in the vicinity of the village are re-painted and new motifs are added. Since the beginning of the 20th century Songo has drawn the attention of ethnologists, art historians, and archaeologists, and today, each year thousands of tourists visit Songo to view its famous rock paintings.

Yet, despite their popularity, relatively little has actually been written about the rock art at Songo and the circumcision ritual performed at the site, or about rock art in the Dogon area more generally. Most information can be gathered from Marcel Griaule's book *Masques dogons*, in which he devoted a whole chapter to rock art on the Bandiagara plateau and in the escarpment, and in which he repeatedly made mention of the Songo paintings. In all, Griaule described motifs from about 70 rock art sites in the Bandiagara region. He reported that the Dogon knew the significance of most of the motifs at these sites and that they were accustomed to re-marking the paintings. Griaule noted the interpretations of the motifs given to him, thus providing us with an invaluable guide to the understanding of this rock art.

For Griaule, the most important rock art site in the Bandiagara region was the *Grand Auvent* (also: *Auvent Desplagnes*, today called Kondi Pegue locally), the circumcision site at Songo. The first photos of its rock art were published in 1907 by Louis Desplagnes, a French colonial officer collecting ethnographic and archaeological information in the region. Since this initial 'discovery', the site has been photographed repeatedly over the past century by researchers and tourists alike. The most detailed photographic documentation was undertaken by Leo Frobenius during the Second German Inner-African Expedition (1908-1910) and by Marcel Griaule (1938) during the French Mission Dakar-Djibouti (1931-1933) and subsequent missions. Since the 1960s the paintings have been photographed by several researchers working among the Dogon, such as Herman Haan (1964), Alain Gallay (c. 1965), Jean Rouch (1970, 1972, 1974), Rogier Bedaux (1976, 1999), Walter van Beek (1980/1981, 1986, 1991, 1994), Paul Lane (1980/81) and Karl-Heinz Striedter (1992).

On the basis of photographs covering nearly a hundred years, it is now possible to follow the changes, which the rock art at the circumcision shelter at Songo underwent during the 20th century. Songo thus offers a unique opportunity to witness the modification of existing motifs at a rock art site and the addition of new ones on the basis of a photographic documentation. The rock wall is not a 'finished product', with all painting activity having ceased. In contrast, the case of Songo shows that over time rock art sites may develop and change.

Griaule, and to a much lesser extent Desplagnes, recorded some ethnographic information on the significance and ritual context of the paintings at Songo. A comparison of the interpretations of motifs collected by Griaule during the early 1930s with interpretations of the same motifs provided by the present-day inhabitants of Songo, permits an evaluation of continuity and change in the significance attributed to particular motifs. Songo also allows us to see how rock art is incorporated into a ceremonial context (in this case: circumcision), and how the ritual proceedings may have changed over time.

2. Rock art at the circumcision site Kondi Pegue in Songo

View online version of this publication for photo collection and video.

3. The Dogon

The Falaise de Bandiagara

The Dogon live in south-eastern Mali in a region termed the *Falaise de Bandiagara*. This area is characterised by a large rocky plateau to the west, an escarpment of several hundreds of metres height extending c. 250 km in a roughly north-east/south-west direction, and an extensive sandy plain to the east. Well known are the Dogon villages of the eastward facing Bandiagara cliffs, where houses of natural stone plastered with clay and granaries constructed out of layers of clay perch on the vertical rock faces. Hundreds more Dogon villages are located on the Bandiagara plateau and the Seno plain towards Burkina Faso.

Most of the *Falaise de Bandiagara* is dry and rocky, with only one permanent stream traversing the area. The lack of water and the limited availability of arable soil have long been a characteristic feature of the region. These natural conditions make the area rather inhospitable on one hand, but on the other, provide a natural defence, as history has shown.

Climate, flora and fauna in the Falaise de Bandiagara

The year in the Bandiagara region can be divided into four seasons: the dry and cold season from December to March, the dry and warm season from March to June, the rainy season from June to October and the harvest season from October to December. During the four months of the rainy season rainfall averages between 400 and 700 mm (Petit 1996). Temperatures vary from a mean of about 31°C in April and May to 24°C in January and February.

The flora and fauna of the Bandiagara region are comparable to that of other regions of the West African savanna belt (Beaudoin 1997). Baobab, acacia and tamarind trees are common. The baobab is utilised by the Dogon in many ways: the fruits are eaten, the leaves provide the basis for a sauce and the bark is used for making ropes. The diversity of the fauna in the Dogon area has diminished in recent decades. While at the beginning of the 20th century hyenas, panthers, lions, monkeys and crocodiles were common in the region, today few large animals are to be found. Some gazelles, antelopes, wild cats and jackals have survived, but because of intensive hunting many species have completely disappeared. The diversity in birds and reptiles has been preserved, and there are several other species of small animals.

The social organisation of the Dogon

The Dogon population in the Bandiagara plateau, cliffs and the Seno plain is estimated at approximately 300.000 people (Gallais 1975: 95). The Dogon villages, approximately 700 in number, are markedly autarchic. Hardly any political structure exists beyond the village level. The bonds between villages are weak, resulting in strong cultural differences between them. These are reflected in material culture and ritual institutions, such as the presence or absence of mask traditions. The linguistic diversity in the Dogon country, with more than fifteen dialects, also mirrors these differences. Often Fulfulde, the language of the Fulani pastoralists, has to serve as the *lingua franca*, because the Dogon dialects are mutually unintelligible. Dogon is distinct from surrounding languages, although it has incorporated elements of languages of neighbouring populations.

The spatial and social structure of Dogon villages is based on lineages, descent groups based on a common ancestor. The Dogon are patrilocal: children live with their fathers, women move to their husband's place of residence. A village usually is divided into quarters which are inhabited by one or more lineages, so-called patri-clans (Lane, in prep.). Age groups (social groups incorporating individuals of the same sex that are born within a three to seven year time span) are a further important characteristic of Dogon social structure. Social status and age are closely linked, with elders and their councils running village affairs. Every Dogon, male and female, has to undergo several initiation rites (*rites de passage*) in their lifetime, each of which takes the individual a step higher up the social ladder (Bouju 1984). Circumcision is one of these initiation rites.

The blacksmiths and leather workers form special groups in Dogon society (Huet 1994). They are endogamous groups: marriage with outsiders is not permitted and both groups are excluded from certain important Dogon customs. Generally, the smiths play a particular role in the villages as advisors and intermediaries in conflicts. They share this latter function with the *hogon*, the highest traditional religious leader of a village (Paulme 1988).

Earning a living: Dogon economy

The Dogon are a farming people whose main crop is millet. Because of the rocky terrain and the lack of water, however, the opportunities for growing crops are limited. The recent construction of dams and wells in the Bandiagara plateau make market gardening possible during the dry season. Onions, peppers, carrots, lettuce and cabbage are grown for sale at local markets. Domestic animals include goats, donkeys, some cattle, and chickens. Wild fruits and plants complement the diet and serve as traditional medicine. Hunting is not of economic importance, but carries prestige.

Several crafts are practiced by the Dogon. While women spin the cotton, it is the men who are responsible for weaving long bands of cloth. The shaping and firing of pottery is a woman's handicraft. It is not, however, practiced in every village (Bedaux 1986).

In contrast to the weavers and potters the smiths and leatherworkers constitute special groups (often termed 'castes') in Dogon society. The blacksmiths make and repair agricultural tools, jewellery and other metal products. They also are responsible for woodworking, such as the production of masks and statues. Leatherworkers fabricate bags, sheaths for knives, saddles, and shoes among other items.

In recent years blacksmiths as well as leatherworkers, have become increasingly involved in the production and trade of souvenirs. The souvenir trade now provides an important source of income and employment in Mali. Many young Dogon earn their living as guides. In a number of villages facilities for tourists have been created, providing a significant source of income for some Dogon (Van Beek 2002; Lane 1988).

Dogon traditional beliefs

The Dogon are well known for their traditional beliefs, which today are best preserved in the inaccessible escarpment, where Islam has spread more slowly than on the plateau. Dogon traditional beliefs have been studied intensively since the 1930s, most notably by Marcel Griaule and his collaborators and disciples who primarily worked in the village group of Sanga (Griaule 1938, 1948; Griaule & Dieterlen 1965).

Three main divine beings exist in Dogon religion: *Ama* (or *Amma*), the sky god, *Nom(m)o*, the water god and *Lewe* (or *Lebe*) the earth god. *Ama*, the main god, is the creator of humans and all other life on earth. Since he intervenes actively in human lives and can act in negative as well as positive ways, most of the sacrifices performed by the Dogon are directed towards him. *Nomo* is most feared among the gods, which seems strange as the Dogon live in a region with restricted access to water. The main village altar is dedicated to *Lewe*, who appears in the shape of a snake (Van Beek 1988). *Lewe's* main priest is the *hogon*, the oldest man of the village (Dieterlen 1982). The Dogon narrate that the *hogon*, living in an isolated house outside or on the edge of the village, is visited by *Lewe* during the night and licked clean. A range of spirits is associated with *Lewe*, such as the *yènèü*, spirits of the trees and the *yèbã* (or *yeban*), spirits of the bush, as well as the *atüwünü* (or *andoumboulou*), small black creatures of the bush who are said to be the first inhabitants of the region (Van Beek 1988; Dieterlen 1941).

The *dama* is a major ceremony in Dogon rituals concerning death (Van Beek 1991). The first funeral, during which the body is buried, takes place a few days after a person has died. It is accompanied by singing, dancing, as well as by mask performances. The *dama*, the second funeral, is a final farewell. It is often celebrated on behalf of several dead at one time, since it requires substantial financial resources to cater for the many participants. Frequently, several years or even decades can elapse between two *damas*, which are usually held after a good harvest. The mask dances are performed by the *awa*, the mask association, and form an important part of the *dama*. About 78 different types of masks have been reported, which can be subdivided into six major categories: birds, mammals, reptiles, Dogon and non-Dogon characters, and objects (Griaule 1938; Imperato 1978). The best known and most popular mask is the *kanaga*.

The development of the *dama* ritual mirrors changes in Dogon society (Van Beek 1991). Today the ceremony takes place later in the year just before the start of the rainy season, due to recently introduced intensive gardening during the dry season and absences of participants of the *dama* because of migrant work. The mask performances are also subject to change: some masks are abandoned and new ones are introduced under the influence of a changing world view. The impact of tourism on the mask dances is considerable, with special public mask dances staged at the demand of tourists, and the fabrication of masks for sale (Richards 2000).

Mask dances form part of another important Dogon ritual, the *sigui*, which is performed in a 60 year cycle. The *sigui* marks the replacement of one generation by another (Dieterlen & Rouch 1971; Griaule 1938). The last *sigui* was celebrated between 1967 and 1974. The ceremony commences in the village of Yougo-Dogorou and subsequently moves in westerly direction to other villages (Marti 1957). During the *dama* and the *sigui* the dancers are addressed in the secret language of the masks, *sigui-so* (Leiris 1948). Although similar masks are fabricated for and used in both ceremonies, a specific mask is made only at the occasion of the *sigui*: the Great Mask. This 'mother of the masks' can be up to 12m high and is kept in a specific cave close to the village (Griaule 1938; Imperato 1978).

Dogon culture is cumulative, new elements being easily incorporated and combined with existing customs. This is also true of religious ideas: variations in religious concepts between villages frequently result from the selective incorporation of ideas from outside, often from Islamic and Christian sources. In some villages these external influences have replaced traditional religious beliefs completely or partially, while in other villages they are incorporated only into certain rituals.

A history of the Dogon

Several oral traditions have been recorded concerning the origin the Dogon. One relates how they came from Mandé, a region located to the south-west of the Bandiagara escarpment near Bamako. According to this oral tradition, the first Dogon settlement was established in the extreme south-west of the escarpment at Kani-Na (Dieterlen 1955). Over time the Dogon moved north along the escarpment, arriving in the Sanga region in the 15th century (Griaule 1938). Another oral history places the origin of the Dogon to the west beyond the river Niger, while a third tells of the Dogon coming from the east. It is possible that the Dogon of today are composed of several groups of diverse origins. All Dogon oral traditions stress, however, that the Bandiagara escarpment offered protection against hostile peoples.

Archaeological investigations and anthropological research in the region of Sanga have shown that in the 15th century the Dogon populated the Bandiagara escarpment. They slowly replaced a resident population, the Tellem ("we found them"). On the basis of archaeological finds from burial caves high up in the escarpment, the Tellem occupation has been dated to the period between the 11th to 16th centuries (Bedaux 1972 and 1988). Well-preserved finds include textiles, such as burial blankets and clothing, leather items and wooden sculptures. These finds belong to the oldest organic materials from archaeological contexts preserved in sub-Saharan Africa. The Tellem were not the first to live among the cliffs, however. Cultural remains, such as granaries, dating to the third and second centuries BC have been attributed to a population termed the Toloy (Bedaux 1972).

The settlement history of the plateau and the plain is less well understood. Local traditions in the plateau, such as those collected for Sibi-Sibi (Bouju 1984) claim that this particular region was unpopulated before the arrival of the Karembé clan from the west. Contrastingly, recent archaeological investigations at Ounjougou suggest a long settlement history on the plateau, spanning the Stone Ages to the recent past (Huysecom 2002).

At the time of the first Dogon settlement in the Sanga region in the 15th century the political arena in the region was dominated by the Empire of Mali, which at this point was on the verge of disintegration (Ly Tall 1977). After the fall of the Empire of Mali small, rivalling power centres occupied the political landscape in the 16th and 17th centuries, causing political unrest in the form of wars and slave raiding. The second half of the 17th century saw the foundation of two Bamana empires: Ségou and Kaarta. During the 17th and the 18th centuries the Bamana from Ségou regularly initiated conflict in the Bandiagara region (Huet 1994: 56-58).

In 1818 the Fulani Empire of Macina was founded by Sheikh Sékou Ahmadou, an important Islamic leader, whose aim was the full conversion to Islam of the inhabitants of his empire. He established his residences close to the Bandiagara plateau: a camp at Modjodjé and three years later his capital at Hamdallahi, about 37 km south-east of Mopti (Mayor 1997). Part of the Dogon population fled to the Bandiagara escarpment to seek refuge from the slave raids carried out by both the Fulani from the west and the Mossi from the south. Because of its inaccessibility the Bandiagara escarpment was never under the full control of the Fulani. However, some villages on the plateau cooperated with the Fulani and converted to Islam in order to avoid confrontation (De Bruijn & Van Dijk 1993).

In c. 1862 the Fulani came into conflict with another proponent of Islam, the Toucouleur El Hadj Omar. His nephew and successor Tidjani Amadou Seydou Tall established his headquarters in Bandiagara, from where he defeated the Fulani in 1864. The Fulani fled towards Timbuktu and the Seno plain and attacked the Toucouleur repeatedly until 1880, causing unrest in the Dogon area. The Dogon villages on the plateau were a source of slaves for the Toucouleur, and many were converted to Islam (Mayor 1997).

In 1890 the French began to colonise the Inner Niger Delta and adjacent regions. The Dogon resisted French colonial rule for more than two decades. In 1920 the last Dogon village, Tabi, submitted to the French (Arnaud 1922). The French improved communication systems and the infrastructure, the result being an opening up of the Bandiagara region. This facilitated the spread of Islam as well as of western influences.

Recent demographic developments

Since the French colonisation and the end of local military conflicts increasing numbers of Dogon have left the cliff settlements and moved to the more fertile plain. This is an ongoing process caused by demographic pressure and limited resources: the population has quadrupled within the past 60 years (Bedaux 1986). About 88% of the Dogon live in the Cercle de Bandiagara, including those who temporarily migrate to work in other regions within and outside Mali (Beaudoin 1997). The Dogon also live in the regions of Douentza and San in Mali, as well as across the border in Burkina Faso (Tougan). About 20% of the young Dogon now settle permanently outside the Cercle de Bandiagara (Keita 1992).

French colonisation and the subsequent pacification of the region encouraged the free movement of people and goods, which intensified the stream of temporary migrants from the Dogon lands. For economic and/or prestige reasons many young Dogon decide to temporarily settle in large cities, such as Bamako, Ségou or Mopti (Bouju 1984), and even in neighbouring countries such as Ghana and Ivory Coast. Also, many farmers migrate in the dry season to help with harvests in other regions. This exploration of additional sources of income allows the Dogon to survive in a harsh environment (Diawara 1997).

4. The village of Songo

The location of the village

Songo is located on the Bandiagara plateau, about 60 km to the west of the escarpment and 14 km to the west-north-west of Bandiagara. The village is surrounded by three rock formations that dominate the landscape. The present circumcision site, Kondi Pegue, with its famous rock paintings, is located at the foot of the northern rock formation. On the eastern rock formation are the remains of the old (previous) village of Songo, Songo Kolo. A third rock formation is located to the south of the present village.

A history of Songo

The history of Songo is the history of the families inhabiting it, rather than the history of a place. Oral traditions report the successive arrivals of the five families living in Songo today: the Yanogué, Karembé, Guindo, Dégoga and Seyba. The order of their arrival is said to form the basis of the social organisation of the present village. The following account presents aspects of family histories as narrated by four elders of the Yanogué, Dégoga, Karembé and Guindo families, respectively:

- Boubacar Yanogué (75-80 years old)
- Boureima Dégoga (c. 90 years old)
- Mama Karembé (c. 70 years old)
- Suleiman Guindo (over 80 years old)

In some respects the accounts of these four individuals are similar, but in others they differ from each other, or even give contradictory information. While individually they elaborate on different aspects of the family histories, taken together, they form a history of the village and its people.

Foundation and order of arrival

All four informants agree that the first to arrive at what today is Songo was Yanoré Yanogué, a farmer from Tilé, a village about 3 km to the south-west of Songo. He is said to have named the place 'Songo', 'between the hills'. For seven years the village founder lived with his family in a rock shelter at the foot of a rock formation to the east of present-day village. This shelter, Yanoré Kiba, is today regarded locally as the first settlement at Songo. Subsequently, the top of the hill was settled, and the village of Songo Kolo established, since it provided protection in times of political instability. Only much later, in

the second half or towards the end of the 19th century, this village was abandoned and the present village of Songo founded in the plain between the three rock formations.

Both the elders of the Karembé and the Guindo name Dana Gendele Karembé, a hunter, as the second to arrive at Songo. According to the Karembé he originated from Tugumbé, a village to the north of Songo. Dana Gendele, it is said, encountered Yanoré clearing the bush on his new land to prepare it for cultivation. At that time Yanoré fetched water from a source far from his shelter. Dana Gendele's dog, however, searching through the thicket close to Yanoré Kiba, emerged wet, indicating a source of water. This discovery made permanent settlement at Songo possible and, subsequently, the land was subdivided between Yanoré and Dana Gendele in the same way as it is divided between their two families today: land close to the water source in the northern half of Songo belongs to the Karembé, while land in the southern half, close to Yanoré Kiba, belongs to the Yanogué.

According to both the Karembé and the Guindo, the Dégoga and Seyba families were the last to arrive in Songo. However, the Dégoga claim that Yanoré Yanogué was joined first by Ansongo Pala, the son of his younger sister, who was married to a Dégoga. Ansongo Pala Dégoga came with his wife and children from Ansongo, a village in the vicinity of Goundaka to the west, because Songo offered better conditions for cultivation. Over time Ansongo Pala was joined by other members of his family. The Seyba, who had lived with the Dégoga at Ansongo, are said to have been the last to arrive at Songo.

The origin of the families of Songo

The different families living in Songo today trace their origin an area lying to the south-west of their present habitat and are able to name a succession of villages where they had settled before. The Yanogué, Karambé and Guindo name 'Mandé' as their place of origin, while the Dégoga informant claims no knowledge as to the origin of his family. After living in the villages of Malina, Kamboló and Nasá, the Yanogué established themselves at Tilé. The Karembé name Sadiá and Tugumbé as previous settlements, while the Dégoga trace their descent from the village of Ansongo. The Guindo family was able to provide the most elaborate migration story. They first settled in Sadiá, close to Kani Kombolé on the Seno plain. They then moved to Kán (or Kani) on the escarpment, before relocating to Tegerí, about 16 km to the south of Songo. After Tegerí the Guindo moved to Niongono, c. 15 km to the west of Songo, and then moved on to Kolí (today Kori Maoundé) about 45 km from Mopti, close to the Bamako-Sevaré route. From there, the Guindo moved to Naouli to the north-west of Songo before finally settling at Songo itself. Various reasons are given for these frequent movements. Unstable times are said to have necessitated frequent relocation, or, more specifically, birds of prey or other wild animals are blamed for having killed off domestic animals: at Tegerí eagles took their chicks, while at Niongono panthers killed their lambs (*nionge* = panther), making these places unsuitable for habitation.

The bonds between the families living at Songo are explained by their shared history. The Yanogué and Dégoga were linked by marriage (Yanoré being Ansongo Pala's uncle), while the Dégoga and Seyba lived together at Ansongo. The close relation between the Guindo and the Karembé is explained by the Karembé on the grounds of their common origin from Tugumbé. In contrast, the Guindo trace their descent, and that of the Karembé, to Naouli. There the Guindo, with the help of supernatural powers, aided the Karembé in a conflict with the village of Tugumbé.

In their family history, the Guindo refer repeatedly to their ability to obtain supernatural aid. One example is given in the explanation of the good relations between the Guindo and the Karembé families as narrated by Souleiman Guindo: When the Guindo moved to Naouli, they assisted the local Karembé in their conflict with the people of Tugumbé. This conflict erupted when the people of Tugumbé refused to allow the people of Naouli to prepare their own sauce for their daily millet dish, *tó*. The Karembé were thus forced to go to Tugumbé to eat their meals. After the Guindo arrived in Naouli, they persuaded the Karembé to eat the *tó* without sauce and thus resist Tugumbé. A war ensued. The attackers from Tugumbé were met by the Karembé and Guindo of Naouli, who employed swarms of bees and thistles in their fight. After a prayer by the Guindo the bees attacked and the thistles stung, and after some fighting all the people from Tugumbé were dead, except one, who was allowed to live and perpetuate his lineage. When the Karembé and Guindo wanted bury their dead, they were unable to distinguish the bones of the Karembé from those of the Guindo. They therefore buried all bones in a mass grave, and since then the Guindo and the Karembé live together at Naouli virtually as one family.

Oral histories and time

On the basis of these oral accounts, estimations can be made concerning the temporal framework of the establishment of the village of Songo. These dates should not be viewed as exact dates, but as rough estimates.

Boubacar Yanogu  names 10 generations since Yanor : after Yanor  came Badji, then Nal , Yolog , Dumbel , Ab , Badji, and Adjum . The line is continued by Adjuma's younger brother Ankundja, his son Anlebe, then Amadou and Boubacar, who is today between 75 and 80 years old. This genealogy gives an indication of the time that has elapsed since the establishment of the village. Estimating (very approximately) about 25 years per generation, this would suggest an establishment of the first settlement at Songo in the 17th century. The establishment of the new village of Songo at the foot of Songo Kolo is dated to the time of Ankundja by Boubacar Yanogu , some time in the second half of the 19th century.

Boureima D goga supplies a date for the beginning of circumcision at Kondi Pegue. According to him, his father's age group was the first to be circumcised at the site. Since his father's age at Boureima's birth can be estimated as at least 50 years old (D goga being the last son of the third wife), the first age group would have been circumcised at Kondi Pegue in approximately 1875.

Local histories and the organisation of the village

According to the oral traditions, the order of arrival determined the subdivision of all land in the village between the two families of the Yanogu  and the Karemb . All the families arriving after the Yanogu  and the Karemb  do not own land in Songo, but work the land owned by these two families. As village founders, the Yanogu  in pre-Islamic times provided the spiritual leader for the village, the *hogan*, while the Karemb  still today provide the village chiefs. The Guindo are responsible for the organisation of the circumcision ritual. Only the D goga and the Seyba families do not seem to have particular functions in the running of village affairs. If the land distribution and the organisation of village affairs indeed mirror the order of arrival, then the claim of the Karemb  to have been the second to arrive at Songo receives some support.

The village of Songo today

Current organisation of the village

With 23 other villages in the region, Songo forms the rural commune of Doucombo, a local community headed nowadays by a mayor who is assisted by 11 advisors. Important decisions on social and political matters are, however, made in gatherings of the village elders, and not at the level of the rural commune. The role of the blacksmith as intermediary has diminished, while the institution of the *hogan* has completely disappeared.

The village of Songo has about 1000 inhabitants. However, many of the inhabitants of Songo are migrant workers and are temporarily absent from the village. Often, children attend schools and live in other villages for part of the year, since places at the local school are limited. Many parents send their children to Islamic schools where they study the Koran under the guidance of a *Marabout*, an Islamic holy man. Whatever the reason for absences, the inhabitants of Songo congregate for specific events, such as circumcision ceremonies, tilling and harvesting.

The village of Songo is subdivided into four village quarters, which are inhabited by one or more of the five families

- Tangatondo (‘quarter of the passers-by’)
- Amiritondo (‘quarter of the village chief’)
- Tondobilanga (‘central quarter’)
- Indj doulotondo (‘quarter of the dogs’)

Quarter:	Families:
Tangatondo	Yanogué Guindo
Amiritondo	Karembé (branch of the village chief) Guindo
Tondobilanga	Karembé (blacksmith branch) Seyba Dégoga Guindo
Indjédoulotondo	Karembé (branch of the village chief) Guindo

Table: The families in the quarters of Songo

Architecture and spatial organisation

The spatial organisation and the architecture of the Songo family compounds are somewhat different from those found in other Dogon villages. Compared to the honeycomb structures of some of the escarpment and plateau compounds (Lauber 1996) the architecture in Songo is more spacious.

An average family compound in Songo consists of two or three houses, some granaries, a cooking area, one or more chicken pens, a hangar, and a bath enclosure. In principle, a man has to build a house and a granary for each of his wives (usually two or three in number) and her children with him. The architecture of the granaries reflects the sex of their owners: male or female. 'Male' granaries with their three doors serve as storage spaces for millet. 'Female' granaries are smaller and only have one door. They are internally subdivided into four main parts for storing a variety of plant products, such as onions, peanuts and peppers.

Considerable differences in spatial organisation, architecture and building materials exist between the older central parts of the village and the newer parts on the village edge. Generally, younger compounds are more spacious than older ones. Building space in the latter has been filled over time, with young families constructing their houses in the compound of the husband's father. Consequently, the restriction of space mirrors the life cycle of a compound. There is, however, a recent tendency for a more generous use of space in the layout of compounds and their buildings in the Dogon area.

The houses in the old part of Songo are rather low (1.75m-2.50m) and their floors are sunk into the ground for some decimetres to ease access to the roof from the outside. These houses are entirely constructed of mud brick apart from a foundation layer of dry stone. More modern houses are higher (2.50m-3.00m) and mainly constructed of dry stone, only the uppermost layers being made of mud brick. In older houses the living room is located in the front part of the house and is entered directly via the front door. A smaller room is located at the back of the house. More modern houses show a different subdivision of space. Here, the living room is entered via a small lobby or entrance hall. However, in both the old and the new parts of Songo several exceptions to these general divisions can be found.

Economy: agriculture, traditional crafts and tourism

Agriculture is the main source of income for the people of Songo. The village is surrounded by dozens of fields, in which various grains are grown, such as sorghum, millet and *fonio*, as well as other plants, such as maize, peanuts and beans. Of these, millet is the most important crop for the economy of Songo. The tilling season for millet begins in June, while the harvesting period commences in November. In between, in September and October, young men often search for temporary work in the cities, and return to Songo for the millet harvest. Gardening begins in the month of December, when vegetables, such as onions and peppers are grown. Generally, farmers produce for their own subsistence, and any surplus is sold in local markets. In January many men and women leave Songo to harvest rice in the wetter regions of Mali. Upon their return towards the end of the dry season, houses and granaries are repaired, and fields are prepared for the new season.

In addition to agriculture, some crafts have varying significance for the village. Weaving has diminished in importance since the introduction of industrially made cloth. There are, however, several locations in

the village where weaving is still practiced by older men. Today, cloth is made mostly for sale in local markets or for sale directly to tourists. There is no leatherworker in Songo, and local demand is met by those in Bandiagara. Metal and wooden items, both for locals and for tourists, are made by a local blacksmith. Tourism has gained in importance during the past 20 years. It has become a considerable source of income for the village since the establishment of a village-run tourist camp and the introduction of a tax to be paid by each tourist visiting Kondi Pegue, the circumcision site.

5. Circumcision at Songo

Circumcision among the Dogon

Songo offers one of the rare opportunities available world-wide for witnessing the creation of rock art in a ritual context, in this case: during a circumcision ceremony. The removal of the prepuce of young boys is common for a variety of reasons among, for example, Muslims and Jews. In Mali this operation is often part of a ritual marking the transformation of a boy into a young adult. Circumcision rituals in the Bandiagara region are characterised by a period of transformation (the operation and following instruction) in seclusion and a period of reintegration into the village community. Circumcision sites are frequently located at or beyond the boundaries of villages. They thus offer protection from the gaze of onlookers, particularly women, and they mark the separation of the boys from the village and their parents. During the period of seclusion social bonds are formed among the members of the circumcision group. Among the Dogon of Songo, such circumcision groups constitute age sets, *toru* (= *tonu* in the Sanga region), which form an important subdivision of society.

Circumcision in Dogon society is a step towards becoming a full adult. Dogon myth, as published by Griaule and Dieterlen (1965), explains the necessity for removing the female element (the prepuce) from a boy's body to enable him to become a man. Similarly, the removal of the clitoris, thought to be the male element in girls, is considered necessary for them to become women. The excision of girls takes place within the villages, in contrast to circumcision ceremonies, which take place outside. Although circumcision is justified by Dogon myth and therefore appears to have a long history among the Dogon, it is possible that this ritual has been adopted only in the more recent past under the influence of Islam, merging with local initiation rites (Van Beek, pers. comm.; Suleiman Guindo, pers. comm.). With the spread of Islam in the Bandiagara region, the circumcision ritual acquires an increasingly Islamic colouration and justification. At Songo, for example, the significance of circumcision is described today as a step on the path to becoming a good Muslim and as a prerequisite to marriage.

The circumcision ritual in the Dogon area, although subject to variation from village to village, has particular features similar to those found in other regions of southern Mali. At Songo boys are circumcised at the rock shelter of Kondi Pegue, a site containing a multitude of paintings. Both circumcision and painting at this locality have been carried out since at least the early 20th century, when Louis Desplagnes (1907) first reported on the site. However, the painted circumcision site at Songo seems to be an exception to the rule. It is the only site known in sub-Saharan Mali where painting on rock surfaces forms an integral part of a circumcision ritual. A detailed description of the ritual at Songo, and the role of the rock paintings, has never been published before. Therefore, no direct comparison of current and past proceedings can be undertaken in order to evaluate continuity and change. After a brief introduction to circumcision among the Dogon, a description of the current proceedings is given here, based on information collected at Songo in 2001 (Kleinitz/Dietz). The main informants were Ali Guindo, Boukari Guindo, Suleiman Guindo, and Soumaila Yanogué. Photographs of the site during the circumcision ritual in March 2000 were taken by the latter.

A history of the circumcision shelter Kondi Pegue

The Guindo and circumcision

Circumcision at Songo is the responsibility of the Guindo family. The Guindo say that circumcision in Songo commenced with the introduction of Islam. They claim to have been entrusted with the operation and the supervision of the boys during the recovery period, since they had already gained experience in circumcision during their stay in Mandé. It is said that, when the Guindo offered to take on the

responsibility of circumcising at Songo and produced as a proof an old circumcision knife brought from Mandé, the Yanogué and the Karembé were still sceptical of their abilities. Only after the Guindo had circumcised their own children and after these had made good recovery, the Guindo were given the authorisation to circumcise all other male children. It is said that the order of circumcision today mirrors this initial event, with a Guindo boy always being the first to be circumcised.

At the time of the first circumcision ritual, said to have been held in a low shelter at Songo Kolo, the old village of Songo, the Guindo claim to have made the polychrome paintings on the ceiling of this shelter. They also claim that the use of three colours in rock painting (red, white, and black), in contrast to the generally monochrome paintings in the area, was introduced by their family. The Guindo family history also stresses the Guindo role in circumcision beyond the village of Songo. Accordingly, they were responsible for circumcision in a region stretching to Mopti and beyond. The circumcision rituals at the villages of Tugumbé and Kori Kori are claimed to have derived from Songo, with permission to hold the ceremonies still residing with the Guindo of Songo.

While the Guindo story explains the introduction of circumcision and the role of the Guindo in the ritual, it conflicts with reports by the other families of Songo. The Yanogué claim to have circumcised their children at a site at Tilé before moving to Songo (before conversion to Islam) and to have undertaken circumcision at Songo Kolo before the arrival of the Guindo. The Karembé also report that circumcision was already practised before the arrival of Islam. Regardless of when the people of Songo commenced circumcising their boys, Kondi Pegue seems to have been an important and widely-known circumcision site when the first western visitors arrived in the region at the beginning of the 20th century.

The choice of the site

The rock shelter Kondi Pegue appears to have been used for the first time as a place for circumcision in the last quarter of the 19th century. According to the Guindo, the place was regarded as most suitable as a circumcision site because it is easily accessible from the village, while still being hidden from direct view. Also, it offered sufficient space for the growing number of initiates. The land, and with it the site, belonged to the Karembé family, but they surrendered it on the demand of the Guindo. It is claimed that the shelter had never been used in any way until it became a circumcision site, and that no paintings existed at this place previously. All paintings are said by the Guindo to have been made during the first circumcision ritual at Kondi Pegue by the elders of their family and to have been modelled on the motifs at the old circumcision site at Songo Kolo.

The development of Kondi Pegue

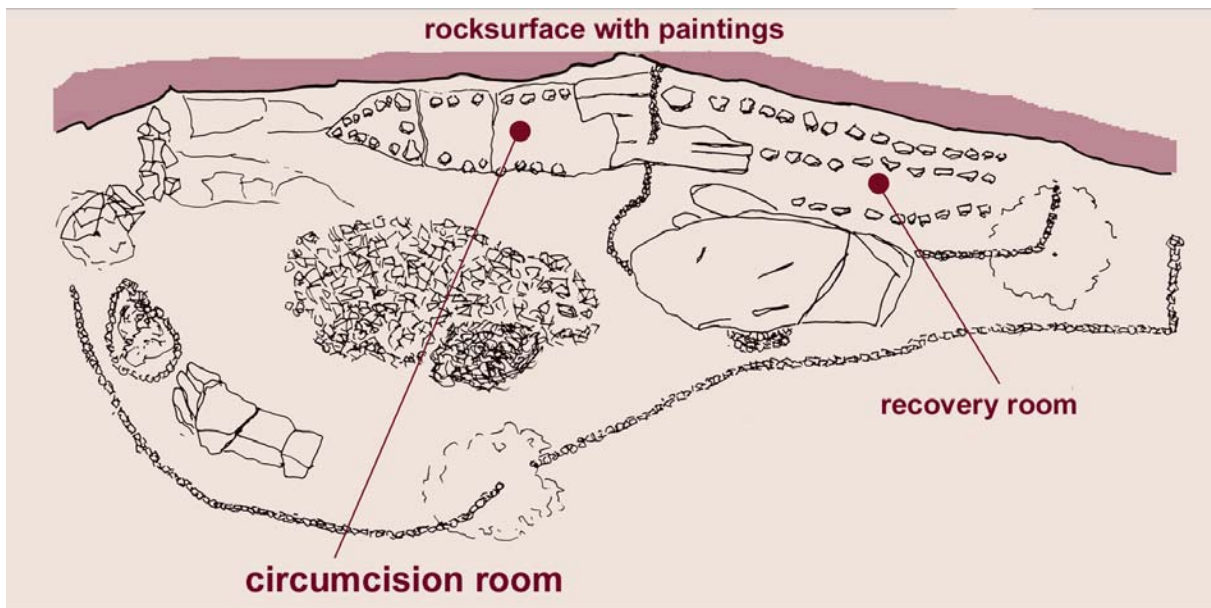
To judge from early photographs, initially only a small part of the rock wall at the circumcision site was painted. Over time, more and more paintings were added, and the painting area expanded to the upper and northern parts of the rock wall. Smaller mobile rocks were also painted at least until the 1930s. This practice is said to have been given up when these stones were taken away by visitors, and now only the large vertical rock surface is painted.

With the expansion of the painted area the site floor was modified. Over the years a low rock wall in the centre of the site was added to, reaching a height of 1.50m today. An early photo (Frobenius 1908) shows the remnants of a mud-brick structure among the stones of the wall. Rocks that are said today to serve as stools for the initiates are found in different parts of the site on photographs dating to different decades. In particular, the back part of the site seems to have undergone a drastic change in its use. Photos by Frobenius (1908) and Griaule (1930s) show stone constructions no longer in existence today, as well as objects apparently stored at the site. The activities at the shelter must have changed significantly over the years, as the clearance of the northern part of the site provided an additional space for the initiates. Today, the shelter is subdivided into two areas: its southern section is a more public area, while the northern section serves as a retreat for the boys just after circumcision.

The current state of the site (including site plan)

The present state of Kondi Pegue has to be regarded as the result of a long evolution. The clear separation of the site into two major (northern and southern) zones, with a high drystone wall between them, seems a rather new development. A gap in the wall serving as the entrance is closed during the

circumcision period, with a temporary door shielding the boys during the festivities at the site. The neat lines of rock stools for the initiates in the northern part of the site also date to the more recent past. In the southern part a pair of stones is said to serve as seats for the initiates during the actual circumcision and for the *maitre de circoncision* (a Dogon name for this function is said to exist but was considered too secret to be revealed). Walls on the outer edges of the site demarcate its limits and restrict the view of onlookers. Smaller drystone walls at the site mark areas where particular families keep their *wandyerma*, musical instruments played only at particular moments during the circumcision ritual by circumcised boys and men.



The circumcision site at Kondi Pegue

The circumcision ritual at Songo

The period of preparation

According to the Guindo the circumcision ritual takes place every third year during the warm, dry season. In exceptional circumstances, such as in cases of drought and bad harvests, the ceremony may be postponed until sufficient food-stuffs are available to feed the hundreds of participants in the celebrations. Today the boys are between 10 and 12 years old at circumcision; formerly they were considerably older, between 15 and 17 years of age. The preparation of the circumcision ritual is initiated by the boys' parents, who ask the village chief to permit their sons to be circumcised. Following this the villagers come together, and an official request is made to the Guindo to organise the circumcision ritual. Once a date for the circumcision is set, the age groups are informed and preparations begin.

Following a gathering of the young people under a big tree to the north of the village, the boys to be circumcised cut millet stalks, while the preceding age group searches for branches. Both stalks and branches are used for building the shelter under which the newly circumcised will sleep. Boys belonging to the age group circumcised in the previous ritual, repair musical instruments that are played at the occasion of the circumcision. Every boy repairs the instruments belonging to his family, since every family has its own *wandyermas*, marked by particular graphic signs. The preparation period for the circumcision ritual lasts several weeks. Once the young people's preparations are completed, the older age groups (who are responsible for the running of the circumcision ritual) are informed, and the operation can be performed.

The operation and the circumcision day

The operation usually takes place on a Thursday in late March. In the year 2000 (26 March), more than 60 boys were circumcised at Kondi Pegue. Generally these are from Songo, but boys from surrounding villages can also be admitted.

In the early hours of the circumcision day, the boys gather at the site, which they have never been allowed to visit before. Besides the initiates, only members of the Guindo family and boys of the preceding age group are allowed to be present during the actual circumcision. The boys enter the site in the early hours of the day, their heads are shaved, and the circumcision is performed. The operation is undertaken by an elder of the Guindo family, who can be appointed for up to three circumcision ceremonies, i.e. nine years. This *maitre de circoncision* selects other members of the Guindo family to witness the circumcision. His successor will be drafted from this group by a council of four Guindo elders.

The first boy to be circumcised, *kondi bala*, is a son of the Guindo, the second, *kondi seri*, is the son of the parents who were the first to request the village chief for the circumcision ritual. According to the Guindo this is a fixed ranking. It is said that only once in their family history, still at Songo Kolo, has it happened that no Guindo son was of the proper age to be circumcised. After the circumcision ritual had passed with a non-Guindo as first to be circumcised, the *maitre de circoncision* prayed to god to always bless his family with a son at the right age as the first candidate for the operation. Thus far, his wish has been granted.

During the operation the boys sit on a rock in front of the painted wall, with the *maitre de circoncision* in front of them. Traditionally a specific knife, the circumcision knife, is used to sever the prepuce. The boys are urged to remain calm and to refrain from crying, which is considered weak and inappropriate to the occasion. After the operation the boys, now called *kondigi* (circumcised children), are led into the northern part of the site where they receive medical treatment in the form of traditional and modern medication. Better medical care has in recent years shortened the recovery period from about 30 to 15 days. By about six o'clock in the morning, when all boys have been circumcised, are dressed in special circumcision shirts, and are seated on rows of stones serving as stools in the northern part of the site, this part of Kondi Pegue is sealed off to visitors and the boys begin their recovery.

The recovery period

While the boys receive medical treatment and are fed chicken soup while sheltered in the northern part of the site, the village begins the general celebration of the circumcision day. All circumcised males from Songo and beyond are entitled to enter the southern part of the site from about 6 a.m. onwards, when the circumcision is completed. Women and children remain banned from approaching but watch from the roofs of nearby houses.

Upon their arrival, the men drink a millet porridge prepared by the women in the houses of the lineage, the *debu bagne* (the local name for what is termed the *gina* in the escarpment). The parents of the initiates have to supply three calabashes each. After this meal the popular part of the ceremony begins: the Guindo begin to sing a particular song that opens the circumcision celebrations, while the remaining villagers join in the refrain. In the next stage in the celebrations, the men proceed to a view point overlooking the village just above the shelter of the *Grand Signe*. There, at a site called *wandyerma tumbi* ('the rock on which the wandyerma are played'), the circumcision rattles are played and songs are sung in a celebration audible and visible to the whole village.

At a particular signal, all able-bodied men race to a spot close to the rock of Songo Kolo, where they grab long wooden poles out of a pile of poles that are then carried back in celebration to Kondi Pegue. The first to arrive with the poles are acknowledged as winners in front of the painted rock wall.

Again, they all return to *wandyerma tumbi* to play the *wandyerma* and sing. Then they eat meat brought by the women and spend the day at the site. In the evening the celebrations at Kondi Pegue conclude with a song thanking all people who have helped in the proceedings.

The entire first night after the circumcision is spent in dancing and singing. During the night, a shelter for the newly circumcised boys is constructed in a compound at the edge of the village, where the boys will sleep every night until they have fully recovered. At about 4 a.m. on the day after the circumcision the

boys are guided back to Kondi Pegue. In all, the circumcised stay at the site for about 15 days. They generally spend the day learning, singing traditional songs and playing musical instruments at Kondi Pegue, and they descend to their hangar in the village after dark. During the recovery period the boys are primarily supervised by members of the preceding age set. Adult members of the Guindo family are present to assist and check that the newly circumcised are correctly instructed.

During the first week of the recovery period the newly circumcised are taught a range of special circumcision songs. Some of these songs are location-specific: they are only sung at particular places in the village visited by the boys during their recovery period. Songs are practiced in groups aiming at excelling each other. Generally, competitions seem to be a typical feature of the circumcision period. Each day, from the third day after the circumcision, the boys are handed small stones to throw towards the high ceiling of the rock shelter of Kondi Pegue. This is seen as a test of the progress of recovery and of individual strength. The circumcision period itself is concluded by a race run by the boys. The duration of the individual stages of the circumcision period, and of the circumcision period in general, seems to depend on the speed of the boys' recovery. The instruction of the boys by the preceding age set is completed by the handing over of the *wandyermas* to the newly circumcised, who are now responsible for their upkeep during the three years until the next circumcision. Then they will teach the younger boys what they have learned during their stay at Kondi Pegue.

The cohesion of the age group is formed through common experiences, such as the circumcision itself and the instruction received. Also, punishment is collective: if a boy makes a serious mistake during the instruction period, the whole age set has to enter a low, dark and hot rock shelter, called the 'prison'. One by one the boys are called out and instructed on correct behaviour. This collective punishment is said by the villagers to make the boys aware that their actions also have effects on others. It also stimulates solidarity.

At the end of the recovery period the parents of the boys supply an indigo-dyed garment for each child. Wearing these garments, the boys are assembled under a large tree on the northern edge of the village. Their heads are then shaved by the old men, and they are told to race up to Kondi Pegue and touch one of three circles in the central part of the painted rock face. The three boys who reach the paintings first and touch the correct dots are promised various benefits, such as a good harvest or a beautiful wife. The next morning the boys race from the circumcision shelter to the houses of their respective lineages, where they climb the roofs and cry out. They have now left Kondi Pegue where they spent approximately 15 days. However, they continue to sleep in their collective hangar at the edge of the village for another ten nights. They then return completely to their respective families. The Guindo distribute the gifts the boys have received for the occasion of their circumcision, and at the very end of the circumcision period the Guindo receive a standard payment for each circumcised boy.

The role of the paintings in the circumcision ritual

Circumcision and painting

Griaule (1938) stresses that the circumcision site at Songo is the only example known to him in the region where painting forms a fixed part of a circumcision ritual. He does not, however, elaborate on the exact role the paintings played in this ritual. It has been assumed that the paintings are used by elders as visual aids for the instruction of young boys during the recovery period, which the Guindo claim is still the case today. Yet, the role of instruction (and of the paintings) within the circumcision ritual is unclear and informants' accounts are contradictory.

According to the Guindo, the re-painting of the motifs at Kondi Pegue is traditionally connected with the circumcision ritual. Re-painting is exclusively undertaken every three years during the circumcision period. Only circumcised male members of the Guindo family, as well as the male children of other families whose mothers are Guindo, are allowed to paint at Kondi Pegue. Additionally, members of the Karembé family are allowed to participate in the re-painting process after authorisation by the Guindo, because of the alliance of both families. In some instances the newly circumcised boys are also allowed to paint if they have already proved themselves able painters. In all instances it has been stressed that only individuals who are good painters are allowed to re-paint the images. Guindo elders monitor the correct re-marking of the motifs, and badly made paintings have to be redone.

The Guindo claim that the aim of the re-painting process is to refresh all motifs at the site. Because of time restrictions or choice, however, not all motifs may be re-done, particularly those in high or

otherwise inaccessible positions. The Guindo stress that only existing paintings are refreshed, and that no new paintings are added. Photographic evidence proves the contrary (see next chapter 'A century of change...'). However, the Guindo's claim of continuity and tradition seems to constitute an important part of the spirit behind the circumcision ritual at Songo. The circumcision period plays an important part in cementing social relations in the village. It both binds the boys of an age set to each other, and forms an important event for the whole village - a manifestation of the uniqueness of Songo and its people.

Rock art at Kondi Pegue: didactic aid during an instruction period?

It is claimed by the Guindo that the instruction period involves the explanation, given to the boys by Guindo elders, of the Dogon adult male's traditional life and values with the aid of the rock paintings. The information that is passed on is specific to the village: it concerns the history and traditions of the people of Songo. The paintings are said to represent everyday objects typical of Dogon life at the time when Kondi Pegue began to be used: horse riders' saddlebags, horse fittings, masks, musical instruments, tools, blankets, and so on. These current interpretations contrast with the explanations of the paintings published by Griaule in the 1930s. At this time they were said mainly to represent ritual objects, such as items used during the *sigui* (bags, staffs and masks). It is said today by the Guindo that the full knowledge of the significance of the paintings is guarded by senior members of their family and is only gradually revealed to younger Guindo. In what way this information is passed on within the family remains unclear.

There seems to exist a considerable liberty in interpreting the paintings. Different members of the Guindo family may attribute different meanings to the same motif. This might reflect differing access to information, for example in successive levels of initiation into the significance of motifs, or the lack of any canonical knowledge on the paintings. In the latter case any meaning attributed to the paintings would be according to their resemblance to objects or beings known to the interpreter.

The re-painting of the motifs at Kondi Pegue commences during the second half of the boys' stay at the site. It is said to stretch over a couple of days until the end of the boys' recovery period. By this time the boys have already received instruction as to behavioural codes and other aspects of this new part of their lives. The boys are allowed to watch (and possibly participate in) the painting process, and they might be given some explanation regarding the paintings. Such explanation may evoke pictures of a bygone pre-Islamic Dogon society, where masks and other ritual items were important. In this way the paintings could serve as illustrations in an identity-forming process focused on the history of Songo and its people, and on the Dogon more generally.

Other roles played by the paintings and the site

Beyond their immediate use during the circumcision ritual, the paintings are said to form an additional focus for the population of Songo. Upon demand, the newly circumcised and the preceding age set sing and play the *wandyermas* at night in the compound of childless couples, which is believed to aid conception. As the *wandyermas* are only played during the circumcision period, this activity appears to be restricted to the recovery period after circumcision. The circumcision period is indeed considered as a particularly favourable time for requesting benedictions and help from supernatural powers. Inhabitants of Songo who intend to travel far away or settle in other places are said to recite prayers in front of the paintings. In both cases offerings are placed in front of the painted rock wall, and in every case the Guindo have to be asked for authorisation and assistance.

6. A century of change at Kondi Pegue

Re-painting, painting and change at Kondi Pegue

The frequent re-painting at Kondi Pegue has had an intriguing side effect: change. In several instances, the repeated application of paint layers over existing paintings has led to a modification of the overall appearance of motifs over time. In the course of decades, re-painting has led to more or less drastic changes in form, as paintings became larger with every painting event and motifs that were once separate occasionally merged into one. Frequently, fine detail was added to motifs, mostly in white and black, elaborating the design. This detail fades quickly in unprotected parts of the wall, if not over-painted during the next painting event.

Although it has often been claimed, by both researchers and the Dogon themselves, that motifs at Kondi Pegue are exclusively re-painted and that no new motifs are added, a comparison of photographs taken at different times over the past century shows that this is not the case. New motifs have been added in great numbers, successively expanding the painted area. In recent years the northern and the upper parts of the site have received the most new paintings, since the southern part of the rock wall was already densely filled with motifs.

In general, motifs change in two aspects: in outlines or general form, and in detail. This applies to both existing and to newly-added motifs. A number of motifs are added, but never re-marked, or are re-marked only rarely. New motifs may be added on top of those that are disappearing. Other motifs are left to fade and disappear over time. Motifs may, therefore, change over time in more than one respect: the same motif might have been newly added, undergone changes in outline and detail, have been left to fade for a time and subsequently may have been re-painted and undergone further changes, and so on. The following section serves as an illustration of the intricate process of change at Kondi Pegue.

Examples of change

(View the online version of this publication for the photo documentation of the process of change.)

1. Changing detail

This example illustrates the observed change in detail. By comparing the photographs, it can be seen that less detail is applied over time and that motifs appear more crude. Painting techniques seem to have changed from the use of fine tools, such as feathers or brushes, to the use of coarser instruments, such as fingers. Fine detail in white and/or black, which is seen in some paintings in the protected higher parts of the wall, seems to have survived from painting events in the first half of the 20th century. On the basis of these photographs, it appears that these motifs were not re-painted.

2. Changing outlines

In a number of instances paintings have undergone drastic changes in their form. For example, in 1965 the motif on the upper left of the photo appears to represent what is often interpreted as a mask dancer, but recent additions make its original form virtually unrecognisable.

3. Newly added motifs

Over time dozens of new paintings have been added at Songo. Initially, these motifs closely resembled existing ones. Recently, however, a number of new forms have been introduced and this process of stylistic change at Songo is ongoing.

4. Fading motifs

Sometimes motifs are left to fade at some point in time. There can be many reasons for this. The subject matter depicted might no longer be understood or might have lost its relevance for the painters. Also, the focus of painting activity may have shifted from one part of the site to another, leaving some areas out of the re-painting process for some time. In addition, individual preference may favour the re-painting of some motifs at the cost of others.

Photo gallery - A century of change: 1905-2001

This section presents fifteen series of comparative photographs of particular motifs or parts of the rock wall at Songo taken during the last century. The first set comprises the southern part of the rock wall for which photographs from the early 20th century are available, allowing for change to be followed over the whole of the past century. Since the northern part of the site was only painted later in the 20th century, change in this part of the rock wall is only visible in more recent photographs. The same is true for the upper part of the wall, which is presented in the third section. Finally, series of photographs for three areas of the rock wall are shown that provide the most dramatic illustration for the various kinds of change at Kondi Pegue: the adding of new motifs, the fading of others, the change of form and detail. This change can be better understood in a temporal context through the dates of the photographs - specific motifs are added at particular times, stylistic choices change, as do painting techniques.

Change in the southern part of the rock wall

A The form of the central 'lizard' was transformed drastically between 1965 and 1991. A motif visible on the upper left (1905 and 1908) has disappeared by 1965, while another had been added to the upper right of the 'lizard' by 1965.

B The central elongated motif has broadly retained its form over the century, but detail visible in 1908 and the 1930s had vanished by 1965. Motifs to its right have merged over time, while a small 'head' was added by 2000.

C The central motif together with the motifs to its right and left has lost some of its details over time. Generally, all motifs have gained in width, a change particularly visible when comparing the photos of 1908 and 2001.

D This example clearly shows the selective re-painting of the motifs, the change of form and loss of detail, and the fading and adding of paintings. Of the five central motifs visible in the 1908 photograph, that furthest to the left and the two furthest to the right, had virtually disappeared by 1986. By the 1930s a new motif had been added in the lower centre. At that time a good deal of detail was visible which had vanished by 1965. The three motifs in the centre had merged by 1992. Between 2000 and 2001 a new painting was added to the lower right of the motifs visible.

E The central motif became part of a much larger merged form over time. By the 1930s an elongated painting had been added to its right, and detail was lost. By 2001 both had become one motif.

F The rock surface in the upper part of the photographs, unmarked in 1905 and 1908, had acquired a large painting by the 1930s. While it was only slightly altered prior to 1986, the motif had been transformed into a 'snake' by 1992.



Photo and © Louis Desplagnes (1905)



Photo and © Leo Frobenius (1908)



Photo and © Marcel Griaule (1931-1933)



Photo and © Alain Gallay (1965)



Photo and © Walter van Beek (1986)

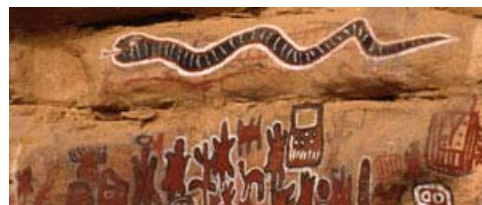


Photo and © Karl-Heinz Striedter (1992)



Photo and © Brigit Dietz (2000)



Photo and © Cornelia Kleinitz (2001)

G While the motifs in the lower part of the photographs remain recognisable, the upper part changes almost completely. All motifs visible in the upper part of the 1908 photograph had disappeared by 2001, with one exception. In the 1930s a new painting was added in the upper centre, but by 1992 it had been superimposed by a much larger painting, which had acquired new detail by 2001. Two lines from the previous motif form the 'nose' of the present one.



Photo and © Marcel Griaule (1931-1933)



Photo and © Alain Gallay (1965)



Photo and © Karl-Heinz Striedter (1992)



Photo and © Cornelia Kleinitz (2001)

Change in the northern (back) part of the rock wall

H In the 1930s the northern part of the rock wall had been painted only sparsely. It had become a focus for painting by 1964, when many more motifs became visible. While painting first focused on the upper part of the northern wall (e.g. 1964), over time the lower part also became filled with motifs (e.g. 1981). Large mask-like motifs in the uppermost part of the photographs are a new development visible in the 1992 photo.

The farthest end of the northern part of the rock wall has only been painted in recent decades. Motifs are constantly being added and transformed. Compared with the older parts of the rock wall, a change is visible in the choice of motifs used. Snake-like motifs or large 'masks' were not part of the earlier repertoire of motifs. A distinct change occurred between 2000 and 2001, when at least ten motifs were added in the visible section.

Change in the upper part of the rock wall

J Painting began on the upper part of the rock wall at some point between 1908 and the early 1930s. Some of the fine detail still visible today seems to stem from the 1930s, implying that since that period this group of motifs has not been re-marked, or has only been minimally re-painted. The slim shapes of the motifs support this hypothesis.

K The first photograph for this section is available from 1965, when large paintings were visible in its upper part. By 1992 and 2001 other large motifs had been added in the lower part of the photograph, differing stylistically from those formerly present.

L Painting on this part of the rock wall only began between 1986 and 1992. In the photograph taken in 1992 three large 'masks' are visible, and a further 'mask' was added between 1992 and 2001.

Areas of particular interest

M This section shows clearly that intricate detail applied on the motifs earlier in the century had largely disappeared by the 1960s. By that time paintings were being created that differed considerably from those previously present: in the 1964 photograph a group of 'dromedaries' (red and white) and anthropomorphs (black) are visible. All these had disappeared by 1986, except for one. Motifs in the central and right hand part of this section were altered beyond recognition between 1986 and 1991.

N In this section the change of detail coupled with a change in form is clearly visible. Detail was widely lost by 1965. From the 1980s motifs were painted more crudely, leading to an enlargement of the motifs at the expense of their original form.

O This section was virtually empty in 1905, but by 1908 it had acquired paintings of 'stuffs' on the right and left. A number of anthropomorphs and a circular form had been added by the 1930s. By 1965 white 'star'-like motifs had been added to the lower part of the section, an anthropomorph to the right part and a saurian motif to the upper left. All of the 'stars' except one had disappeared by 1992, at which time a number of motifs were painted in the central part of the section. In this period the anthropomorph and 'staff' on the lower right were joined. No further additions were visible after 1992, but re-painting led to an enlargement of the motifs.



Photo and © Louis Desplagnes (1905)

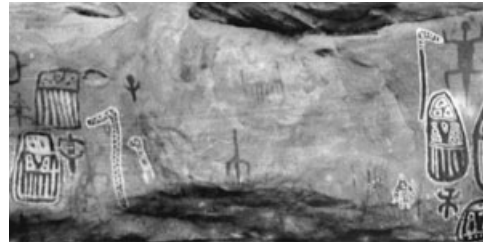


Photo and © Leo Frobenius (1908)



Photo and © Marcel Griaule (1931-1933)



Photo and © Alain Gallay (1965)



Photo and © Rogier Bedaux (1976)



Photo and © Karl-Heinz Striedter (1992)



Photo and © Brigit Dietz (2000)



Photo and © Cornelia Kleinitz (2001)

7. The interpretation of rock art in Songo

Current interpretations

Every year Songo is visited by hundreds of tourists. In most cases visitors only stay for a short time in the village, visiting the rock art site and making a brief tour through the village. Tourists generally arrive at the tourist camp, which offers accommodation, refreshments and local souvenirs. They are taken by guides (local people and/or outsiders) to Kondi Pegue, following a route through the village that usually allows a view of the mosques and the *toguna*, as well as of picturesque granaries and areas where the men weave long strips of cotton cloth. Upon reaching the north-western extremity of the village and after a short climb, the large polychrome painting of the shelter of the *Grand Signe* becomes visible. The painting is often said to represent a crocodile, an animal that has now become rare in the region. Close by, in the shelter of the *wandyermas*, the tourists are shown these musical instruments, with an explanation of their function in the circumcision ritual. A large rocky platform above this shelter offers magnificent views over the village and the surrounding landscape. After a short walk to the north, Kondi Pegue with its multitude of colourful paintings comes into view.

After reaching the site tour guides, often local farmers, provide information on local history, the proceedings of the circumcision ritual and explanations of the significance which some of the paintings have for them. Generally, these explanations focus on a restricted number of 'spectacular' motifs, which are thought to be of interest to the tourists. Among them are a large "snake", a small "white fox", five "spirits", "masks" and some disks. Depending on the duration of the visit and the guide's knowledge, different motifs at the rock wall may be selected for description and interpretation. However, by no means all of the paintings can be explained by local guides.

When interviewed in February 2000, the local farmer and guide Soumaila Yanogu  was able to identify all in all 40% of the paintings at Kondi Pegue. Yanogu  referred to the other 60% as "unknown". According to these interpretations the known motifs at the site can be classified by several themes. Within these themes motifs depicting the same subject matter are often markedly varied in shape, as can be seen, for example, in different versions of the '*kanaga*-masks'. The themes mirror current interpretations of the rock art at Kondi Pegue by the men of Songo.

External guides may offer somewhat different explanations, linking the rock art of Songo stronger to the Sanga region with its animistic beliefs and traditional institutions, which were described by Griaule and his collaborators since the 1930s. The explanations provided by external tour guides are often contested by the locals of Songo, who stress the local specificity of the site and its paintings, and the importance of local knowledge in the interpretation of the imagery. Interpretation and re-interpretation by the different users of the site thus appear to be a characteristic feature of the rock art at Songo.

Themes (view online version of this publications for photographs)

Animals

Masks

Utensils

Horse items (with reference also to bags and blankets)

Blankets

Bags

Supernatural beings

Other

Bag or blanket? Variability and change in the interpretations of rock art motifs at Songo

The first reports on rock art in the Dogon area mention the existence of indigenous knowledge regarding the significance of rock art motifs in the region. Desplagnes (1907) was told that motifs at the Songo circumcision site represent bags, animals, humans, devils, spirits, and tools. The significance of some motifs was said to be unknown. This information accords to a large degree with the more extensive interpretations published by Marcel Griaule in *Masques Dogons* (1938). Griaule lists bags used during the *sigui*, tools, weapons, dress items, spirits and animals - most prominently lizards - as being represented at Songo. However, according to Griaule, most motifs represent masks or mask dancers, showing a significant difference from the list provided by Desplagnes.

Context and classification of rock art at Songo

Griaule (1938) classes the paintings at Songo as *bammi*, paintings made in a ritual context, as opposed to *tonu*, which lack such a ritual context. In his view, ritual paintings in rock shelters in the Bandiagara region were created primarily at localities where masks were made and kept. The masks were used in rituals relating to death, such as the *dama* and the *sigui*. The paintings on the rock walls were to receive and contain the released and potentially dangerous *nyama* ('life force') of the dead (Griaule 1938). The *nyama* was transferred to the painting by mixing red paint (used for decorating the masks themselves) with the blood of a sacrificial animal, and then painting the image of the mask or the dead person/animal on the rock wall with this mixture. After this the image was touched with the mask and particular words were spoken. In contrast, the *tonu* were made at rock shelters used by men as rest places, or in circumcision shelters, where they were painted by the boys as a past-time during their retreat. The paintings at the circumcision shelter at Songo seem to be an exception. Griaule considers them to be ritual paintings (*bammi*) rather than non-ritual ones (*tonu*). They differ in comparison to those found at other circumcision sites, in so far as the creation of rock art is undertaken in a ritual context by elders and other authorised persons.

In a later publication, *Le renard pâle*, Griaule and Dieterlen (1965) introduce the reader to an extensive system of signs pervading all aspects of Dogon life. They stress that the information in *Masques dogons* only represents 'common', simple knowledge, available at a first stage of initiation. They claim to have gained access to the highest level of initiation in a later stage of their research, which enabled them to provide more detailed information. In this research, the *tonu* and *bammi* classification of *Masques dogons* is replaced by a system of graphic signs where each sign represents one of four levels of abstraction: *bummo* (highest level of abstraction), *yala*, *tonu*, and *toymu* (lowest level of abstraction) (Griaule and Dieterlen 1965). The interpretation of rock art motifs in *Le renard pâle* differs from that provided in earlier publications. For example, a large motif in the shelter of the *Grand Signe* immediately to the south of Kondi Pegue is interpreted as "elephant mask *nige*" in *Masques dogons*. In *Le renard pâle* it is interpreted as "trace of the sacrificed *Nommo's* blood" or "drawing of the stopping (place) of the resurrected *Nommo*" (the assignation of the name is not clear, since the authors refer to two adjacent motifs). Griaule and Dieterlen (1965) also claim that the motifs at Kondi Pegue are referred to by the locals as "*tonu* of the chameleon". To initiates these motifs are said to represent the 266 signs of the god *Ama*, all Dogon totemic prohibitions, as well as objects or materials used during the *sigui*.

The interpretations of the motifs at Songo published in the 1960s show a marked difference from those given by Griaule in *Masques dogons*. The paintings are no longer considered *bammi*, but *tonu*. Although the concepts of *bammi/tonu* and *bummo/yala/tonu/toymu* are not completely congruent, both imply a stronger abstraction and secrecy for the *bammi/bummo* and a more openly accessible placement and less abstract form for the *tonu*. This points to a contradiction in Griaule's research, since the paintings at Kondi Pegue seem to be both, *bammi* and *tonu*.

Apart from this inconsistency, differences in the interpretation of the same motif could well be explained as reflecting different levels of initiatory knowledge among the Dogon, as claimed by Griaule and Dieterlen (1965). In such cases the access to knowledge, for example the significance of rock paintings, would be guarded by a small group of people possessing full knowledge (in the case of Songo presumably the elders of the Guindo family), and any deeper meaning would only be revealed in a succession of initiatory steps. Yet, only Griaule and his collaborators appear to have been able to gain access to this deep Dogon symbolism. Their claims, particularly those laid out in *Le renard pâle*, have met widespread scepticism and even rejection, and the existence of successive levels of knowledge among the Dogon has been strongly contested (e.g. Van Beek 1991).

Some re-interpretation of motifs could occur over time as a side effect of changes in the form of motifs as the result of frequent re-marking. This would presume, however, that the interpretation of rock art motifs is, in some respect at least, based on their formal resemblance to objects, persons or concepts known to the interpreter. With this in mind, rock art motifs appear open to re-interpretation, and more than one meaning might have been attributed to any one motif over time. Different interpretations may also have been attributed to individual motifs by different persons at any particular moment in time.

A comparison: 'early' and current interpretations of paintings at Songo

The process of re-interpreting motifs over time can be followed when comparing the meanings of motifs given in *Masques dogons* and those offered by today's guides at Kondi Pegue. In the following part of this chapter a comparison is made between a range of interpretations of motifs as published by Griaule in 1938 and as described by Soumaila Yanogu , a guide at Songo in 2001. It must be stressed that the interpretation of the paintings as told by Yanogu  is only one of several possible current interpretations of the motifs. Equally, Griaule's version may be just one of several possible interpretations of that time.

Today's guides may offer interpretations of the motifs at the site in different narrative contexts: by associating them with a story about the history of Songo and its people, by describing the circumcision ritual at the site or by speaking about the traditional life of the Dogon in general. Explanations by local guides stress the local importance and role of the paintings, while external guides usually place Songo's rock art within a larger animistic Dogon tradition.

While a number of Griaule's (1938) interpretations of rock art motifs at Kondi Pegue coincide with current interpretations by locals of Songo, others differ drastically. This re-interpretation is demonstrated by a direct juxtaposition of interpretations of specific motifs from Griaule (1938) and Yanogu  (2001). In addition, a range of motifs and their interpretations are presented that have been added since Griaule's time. Furthermore, an example is given for motifs to which meanings were attributed in Griaule's time, but which have since been allowed to fade and disappear. Often even newly-added motifs cannot be identified. This suggests the possible role of individual choice in the painting process. Forms employed more recently seem to conform less to a fixed canon of motifs. Consideration of all these examples indicate that particular themes have gained importance for the people of Songo, and that others have lost their relevance over time.

(View online version of this publications for photographs.)

1. Similar interpretations

A number of motifs, such as the more spectacular 'masks' are interpreted today by the people of Songo in much the same way as in Griaule's time. However, the range of variation of motifs included in the '*kanaga* mask' category is drastically larger today, with the inclusion of motifs bearing little or no formal resemblance to the appearance of the *kanaga* mask.

Mask *sirige*
Mask *kanaga*
Lizard

2. Differing interpretations

Interpretations of some motifs vary markedly between those given in Griaule (1938) and those provided today. For example, Griaule interprets 'bags' generally as those carried on the occasion of the *sigui*. This interpretation is not encountered today, since 'bags' are either referred to as 'horse bags', the 'bag of a *hogan*' or non-specified 'bags'. This is a remarkable contrast, which might mirror Songo's change to a profoundly Muslim village with the loss of non-Islamic traditions.

Griaule: Bag used during *sigui*
Yanogu : Horse bag (saddle bag)

Griaule: Beater
Yanogu : Knife of the blacksmith

Griaule: Throwing stick
Yanogu : Village founder with his hatchet
External guides interpret this motif as '*hogan* with his staff', while a member of the Guindo family referred to it as '*maitre de circoncision* with his hachette, before knives were used for circumcision'.

Griaule: Sword
Yanogu : Pickaxe of the blacksmith

Griaule: Part of horse harness
Yanogué: Mask *sirige*

3. Newly added motifs

A wide range of motifs has been added since the 1930s. They often differ thematically and stylistically from earlier motifs described in Griaule (e.g. 'pale fox', 'star', 'dromedary', 'snake'). Generally, these motifs are more 'naturalistic' and elaborate in appearance, and often larger in size, as in, for example, the 'snake', the 'cow mask', the 'horse blanket' and the 'djinn', to mention but a few. Other motifs are variations on previous themes, such as the new 'masks' (e.g. 'buffalo mask', 'cow mask'), while others seem to fit more comfortably into Griaule's canon of motifs, such as the 'blanket of the *hogon*'.

This motif, commonly referred to by the locals as the 'pale fox', is an important figure in Dogon myth according to Griaule and Dieterlen, and was only added after Griaule's initial visit to the site. It first becomes visible in photographs from the early 1960s.

This 'star' first becomes visible in photographs dating back to 1965.

This painting is said to represent the blanket of a *hogon*.

This relatively new motif, interpreted by Somaila Yanogué as 'djinn' was added between 1992 and 1999.

This motif, said to represent a 'buffalo mask' had been added to the upper part of the rock wall by 1992.

This motif, a 'cow mask', overlies a number of earlier motifs of different form. It was added before 1992.

This motif is interpreted by Somaila Yanogué as a 'horse blanket'. It was added before 1992 to the upper part of the rock wall.

A previous elongated motif at this spot was added before 1931. It was covered by this 'snake' between 1986 and 1992.

This painting of a 'dromedary' is first visible in a photograph from 1964. It was added to the wall together with other similar motifs that disappeared soon after.

4. Faded motifs and 'unknown' motifs

When one observes the rock wall from close proximity, the remnants of faded motifs can be made out, often partially underlying new motifs.

These motifs, referred to as 'brooches' by Griaule (1938), have not been re-painted for many years and are slowly fading.

5. Other

These three circular motifs, for which no interpretation is given as to their meaning, are the focus of a race by the circumcised boys towards the end of their recovery period. The three boys who are first to reach and touch the circles at the end of a race from a tree on the northern edge of the village, are promised various benefits in their adult lives. This race is said to be an intricate part of the circumcision ritual. However, these motifs have only existed as a group of three circles for a limited period of time. The two outer circles have undergone change in form from sub-rectangular (in 1908) to circular (in the 1930s), while the central circle was only added to the rock art panel shortly before 1992.

8. Rock art in the Bandiagara region

Songo and surroundings

Rock shelters in the vicinity of Kondi Pegue

The circumcision site at Songo, although the most commonly known, is only one of several rock art sites in the vicinity of the village. The best known of these is the shelter of the *Grand Signe*, as Griaule termed it. Located in the immediate proximity of the circumcision site and offering a spectacular view over the village, it seems to be utilised during the circumcision ceremony, although its exact function remains elusive.

Griaule reports that it was the boys themselves who re-painted the large motif on the ceiling of the shelter (Griaule 1938), which was then described as an elephant mask. Today it is re-painted by adults and is said to represent a crocodile. A change in the form of the motif over time can be easily recognised when comparing photographs taken in 1931 and in 1964 (Griaule & Dieterlen 1965) and in 2001 (Kleinitz). A number of further paintings are located on the ceiling and side walls of this shelter, while its floor is covered with pecked motifs, some of which resemble the 'masks' and 'lizards' of the painted rock art.

Paintings are also to be seen on the walls of a small shelter at the foot of the *Grand Signe*, where musical instruments are kept. These *wandyermas*, a type of rattle, are played by men and circumcised boys exclusively during the circumcision ritual.

A neighbouring shelter, today termed the 'prison', shows traces of more or less faded motifs on the ceiling, on floor surfaces and boulders. Consequently, although the large vertical rock wall of the circumcision site is the most impressive rock art site at Songo, it forms only part of a wider complex of painted shelters used for specific purposes during the circumcision ritual.

The old village of Songo: Songo Kolo

In addition to the rock shelter complex at Songo many more rock art sites exist in the vicinity of the village. On top of the eastern rock outcrop, for example, at the site of the old village of Songo (Songo Kolo), several painted rock shelters have been identified. Most are inconspicuous and thus easy to overlook. For example, a number of faded paintings were found on the ceiling of a small shelter that now holds what is said to be the old wooden village gate. At other sites, all located around the north-eastern edge of the old village, there is a variety of better preserved paintings.

The most spectacular rock art site at Songo Kolo is a low shelter that once served, according to the local people, as circumcision shelter before the village moved down into the plain. This old circumcision site, more than 11m wide and less than one metre high, shows many motifs on its ceiling and walls of the kind also found at Kondi Pegue. Members of the Guindo family identified representations of the mask *karakarapili* (bird mask), the mask *dina*, human beings, baobab trees and bags. Some circular motifs were said to have been touched by the boys during the circumcision ritual in a similar game to that played during the present circumcision ritual at Kondi Pegue.

The Guindo claim that all painting activity at the old village of Songo ceased at the moment when the village was relocated. The paintings at the circumcision site have, accordingly, not been altered for more than a century. The similarity between the motifs at the old and new circumcision sites is presented as proof of their direct connection, the paintings at the new site copying those at Songo Kolo. These claims need to be questioned, however. Stylistically the youngest layer of motifs at Songo Kolo strongly resembles motifs from the younger parts of Kondi Pegue, particularly with respect to what are said to be depictions of masks and musical instruments. While the most recent motifs at Songo Kolo resemble those found today at Kondi Pegue, they differ in style and technique from those visible in early photographs of Kondi Pegue. It may, therefore, be possible that the most recent layer of paintings at Songo Kolo has been added, or at least been altered, within the past two decades or so. However, judging the matter solely on the basis of motifs, it cannot be excluded that motifs from Songo Kolo may have served as a source of inspiration for more recent painting at *Kondi Pegue*. The red and white

paints used at Songo Kolo support a young date for the latest layer of motifs, as they appear similar to the thick layers of paint used in recent re-painting events at Kondi Pegue.

While the polychrome motifs at both sites appear relatively similar, the appearance of the circumcision shelters is markedly different. While Kondi Pegue is a high shelter with a large vertical back wall of more than 40m in length, the site at Songo Kolo is a small, low, and narrow shelter that is hidden from view. The strong variation between the attributes of both sites suggests that significant changes have taken place in the circumcision ritual at Songo during the past 100 years. Today more than 60 boys take part in the circumcision ritual at Kondi Pegue. In contrast, only a few boys could be accommodated at the site at Songo Kolo. Equally, because of the severely restricted space at the shelter, the actual circumcision of the boys might have taken place at a different spot. The public aspect of the circumcision ritual at Kondi Pegue would have been largely absent at Songo Kolo (at least at the site itself). While the number and density of paintings in the circumcision shelter at Songo Kolo identify this place as a site important to the old village, its exact role in village life and in a circumcision ritual remains elusive. The location of the site just beyond the edge of the village, in a rocky area with a number of upright stone slabs, with deposits of complete pots and scatters of ceramic sherds, points to a ritual context for the paintings, be it circumcision or other rituals.

Other sites in the vicinity of Songo

Additional rock art sites are located near Songo beyond the area enclosed by the three rock outcrops. These sites are usually associated with the remains of deserted villages, including the stone foundations of houses, stone alignments, upstanding stone slabs, circular stone structures, work areas, iron smelting areas and others. Judging from local oral traditions and archaeological finds, these villages date to the mid- to late second millennium AD.

At the edge of the old village of Tilé, the supposed place of origin of the Yanogué family, is a rock art site said to be the original circumcision site of the Yanogué family before they moved to Songo.

No memory is claimed concerning the function of rock art sites at Panko, a deserted village in the immediate vicinity of Songo. Most of the rock art sites are small shelters with monochrome red paintings often resembling older motifs at Songo Kolo and Kondi Pegue.

Motifs at the largest of these sites, *Nonli* ('the place'), are somewhat different, however. They include hand prints and painted hand-like forms. The motifs at Nonli are in monochrome red, but this does not necessarily rule out the idea that they, like those at other rock art sites, were once polychrome. As can be seen at Songo Kolo, the paints used in polychrome motifs deteriorate at different rates. Often it is the reds that last longest, while whites and blacks wash off, fade or flake more rapidly.

In the Songo region today all living memory regarding the function of rock art sites and the practice of painting on rock surfaces pertains to the circumcision ritual. Griaule's (1938) work on Dogon masks, however, indicates that rock art in the Bandiagara region was also created in other contexts, for example in places where masks were stored and in other shelters connected with ceremonies for the dead.

Rock art on the Bandiagara plateau and the falaise

Marcel Griaule mentioned more than 70 rock art sites in the Bandiagara region (Griaule 1938). Some sites were marked and used in profane, others in ritual contexts. Rock art localities were used as mask shelters, sites where masks were made and kept, or as sites for retreat before the great mask festivals, such as the *sigui*. They also functioned as circumcision sites, or as rest places for goat herders and their animals, and others (Gallay 1964). Some of the sites mentioned by Griaule are still used today and often access is not permitted to foreigners and/or to women.

According to Griaule recurring themes in the rock art of this region are masks and mask dancers, items used in the *sigui* festival, such as bags, while humans and animals are represented more rarely (Griaule 1938). The variability of motifs and site attributes at, for example, the sites in and around the village of Songo suggests, however, that the themes and contexts of rock art may have been much more varied than Griaule assumed.

Since Griaule did not copy all the motifs he found at the rock art sites he visited, and since information is sparse on the rock shelters themselves, we still know little about the types of sites used, the combination of motifs and their location at the shelters. Although some additional information on rock art in the Dogon settlement area was published by de Ganay (1940), Szumowski (1956), Gallay (1964), Griaule and Dieterlen (1965) and Dieterlen (1971, 1989), most rock art sites remain only superficially researched. In order to gain a better understanding of rock art in the Bandiagara plateau and escarpment, considerable work remains to be done. However, owing to the current loss of traditional beliefs and customs, the use of rock art sites is diminishing and often knowledge on the significance of motifs and the function of the sites is no more than a fading memory.

Rock art in the villages of Sanga

Sanga, an agglomeration of 15 villages on the edge of the Bandiagara plateau, was Marcel Griaule's base for his study of the Dogon. Many of Griaule's (1938) observations on rock art in the Bandiagara region were recorded in Sanga, where a number of rock art sites of different function are still used today. Since most of these are not accessible to the public, a selection of four rock art sites is briefly described here, together with explanations of their functions as given in January 2001. The first three sites presented are used in the course of the *sigui* festival and on other occasions when masks are made, utilised and stored, while the last is used during a circumcision ritual.

The shelter *Djemé Togolo*, for example, was formerly used for the preparation and storage of masks. Today the masks are stored at the mask dancers' houses, since with the increase of tourism they were stolen from the rock shelter and sold to tourists. Some of the designs on the ceiling are said to have been made recently by children, but others are recognised as ancient motifs, made by the ancestors of the present inhabitants of Sanga. Motifs present have been identified as: a burial blanket, the bag used by an *olubaru* (initiate of the masks), a great mask, the mask *kanaga*, a stool used by the dancers during the *sigui*, the knife of the masks, the calabash used by the *yasigine* (the only female member of the mask society), and a representation of a Dogon field.

The low shelter *Kukomo Kommo* serves as a retreat site before a *sigui* festival for the *olubaru* from four of the districts of Sanga: Gogoli, Bongo, Diamini-kura, and Diamini-na. The *olubaru* of these villages gather at this site for three months before the beginning of the *sigui*. It is claimed that before the *olubaru* enter the site the mask-like pictographs on the ceiling of the site are re-painted by those elders of the participating villages who have witnessed the last *sigui*. The arrival of the *sigui* in the Sanga villages is said to be announced by the *olubaru*'s beating of a rock gong at the site.

Segere Kommo, a small, low shelter, serves as home for the *yasigine*, the sister of the masks, during the months of the *sigui*. The few motifs present are said to represent the *yasigine*'s calabash, her field, and the mask *sirige*.

Sakri Kommo, the 'shelter where children are taught to sing', is a large and spacious rock shelter where young boys were circumcised in previous times. Today, this operation is undertaken at the hospital, but after their circumcision the boys spend some time at the shelter, singing and playing. As the circumcision age is lower today than it used to be, an explanation of the motifs on the shelter walls and of the masks and their utilisation is said to be given to young men at the time of marriage, and not at the time of their circumcision, when they are considered to be too young. Gallay (1964) was informed that the boys drew the motifs as a past-time after their circumcision – the rock art is thus not part of the circumcision ritual itself. In contrast, it is now claimed that the paintings at *Sakri Kommo* were first made by the Dogon when they arrived at this place. They are re-painted from time to time when they are effaced by the rain and threaten to disappear.

The following themes, among others, are depicted on the rock surfaces: a great variety of mask types, tools used by the blacksmith (who used to perform the circumcision), lizards, the blanket of the *hogon*, the pale fox, and the *Nomo* (water god). Masks are by far the most common motifs. The contemporary visitor is told that the motifs serve as models for the creation of the masks, as blueprints for their correct shapes. A similar explanation was recorded by Griaule (1938) for the making of the very first rock paintings among the Dogon after the legendary finding of the masks in the bush. It is possible that the

modern explanation is drawn from Griaule's works to satisfy the questioning visitor, rather than reflecting the tradition of this particular rock art site.

Conclusions

Rock art is often seen as a remnant of the past, fossilised and unchanged except for damage caused by the elements and destructive human intervention. The creators of the rock art have long disappeared, and their story remains untold. They left pictures without captions. The rock shelter Kondi Pegue at Songo is one of the few sites on the African continent where rock art is still made and used in a ceremonial context, and where some direct information can be gained as to the significance attributed to the motifs and their function(s).

Rock art is created and used in the context of a circumcision ritual, although it is not known how long this particular tradition has existed at Songo. The connection of rock art and circumcision does not seem to be typical among the Dogon. Kondi Pegue is the only place known in the Bandiagara region (and in sub-Saharan Mali) where rock art is made and/or modified as part of a circumcision ritual.

The photographic documentation of the paintings at Kondi Pegue over the past century or so illustrates a side of rock art that cannot normally be observed: development and change. These changes include: the addition of paintings on the rock wall, the modification of motifs over time, the interpretation and re-interpretation of rock art, as well as changes in architectural features at the rock art site. The study of change at Kondi Pegue provides an unusual glimpse of the temporality of rock art.

There are "times of the signs" - rock art is made and interpreted at a particular time and in a particular context only. The paintings are said to be of importance to the village at particular moments, such as during the circumcision ritual, but otherwise seem to have little social impact other than as a tourist attraction. The motifs themselves reflect temporality, they are 'signs of the times'. Their forms are partially preserved, and partially altered over time. Some motifs are left to fade, while others are added. New motifs may differ drastically in style from established ones, reflecting an inherent dynamism in Dogon visual expression and in Dogon society more generally.

This dynamism is also apparent in differences in the interpretations of motifs over time and in the interpretations given by different individuals at any particular moment, although this may also depend on the informant's knowledge. The paintings are incorporated into narratives, such as in explanations of village traditions to children or tourists. Yet, the paintings also influence the narrative. Motifs may be included, excluded or re-interpreted in explanations, causing changes in what is told. Consequently, the 'living' and ever-changing rock art site Kondi Pegue provides a rare and possibly even unique example for the dynamism inherent in the making and use of rock art on the African continent.

Glossary

Local terms

<i>Ama (Amma)</i>	the sky god
<i>bammi</i>	paintings made in a ritual context, according to Griaule (1938)
<i>dama</i>	major ceremony of the Dogon rituals concerning death, second burial
<i>hogon</i>	the highest religious leader of a village
<i>kondi bala</i>	the first boy to be circumcised in a given year
<i>kondigi</i>	the circumcised boys
<i>Kondi Pegue</i>	the present circumcision site of Songo
<i>kondi seri</i>	the second boy to be circumcised in a given year
<i>Lewe (Lebe)</i>	the earth god
<i>Nomo (Nommo)</i>	the water god
<i>nyama</i>	life force
<i>olubaru</i>	initiate of the masks, speaker of <i>Sigui-so</i>
<i>sigui</i>	major Dogon ritual, performed every sixty years, which is said to mark the replacement of one generation by another
<i>sigui-so</i>	the secret language of the masks
<i>Songo Kolo</i>	the old village of Songo
<i>toguna</i>	men's meeting house
<i>tonu</i>	paintings made in a non-ritual context, according to Griaule (1938)
<i>toru</i>	age group, social group incorporating individuals of the same sex that are born within a three to seven year span in the Dogon region
<i>wandyerma</i>	musical instruments that are played only during the circumcision ritual by circumcised boys and men, kind of rattles
<i>Yanoré Kiba</i>	shelter where Yanoré Yanogué, the village founder of Songo, and his family are said to have initially lived for seven years

French terms

<i>falaise</i>	cliff, escarpment. In Bandiagara also the rocky strip at the foot of the escarpment is considered part of the <i>falaise</i> .
<i>Grand Auvent</i>	French name for <i>Kondi Pegue</i> , transl. 'the large rock shelter'
<i>Grand Signe</i>	large motif on the ceiling of a rock shelter immediately to the south of <i>Kondi Pegue</i> (term used by Marcel Griaule)
<i>hangar</i>	shelter made of branches
<i>maître de circoncision</i>	person performing the circumcision and supervising the proceedings

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