

# A SEGMENTARY SOCIETY BETWEEN COLONIAL FRONTIERS: THE KISSI OF LIBERIA, SIERRA LEONE AND GUINEA 1892-1913

Andreas Massing (Liberian Studies Journal vol.IX, no.1, 1980-81)

## Part I. Pre-Colonial Territories

The Kissi have remained a truly segmentary society despite a recent history which exposed them to more organized and centralized political units such as chiefdoms and territorial states. The Kissi habitat, the undulating terrain of the forest edge, which is dotted by numerous forested hillocks and watered by many small streams and rivulets favors the dispersion of population units and social fragmentation. Apparently the light forest covers has favoured a population expansion which has resulted in densities exceeding those of the neighbouring peoples in the more forested south. Today population pressure in wide areas is such that the Kissi shifting cultivators can no longer maintain fallow periods sufficiently long to keep the system in equilibrium. Denudation of the soil, erosion and probably declining yields are the consequence of the extensions of farmland into the forest.

Kissi traditions speak of the gradual movement south of lineage segments in quest for farmland. In that movement the Makona river was crossed in relatively recent times.<sup>1</sup> The search for new farmland made for great spatial dispersion of the Kissi clans (kaalan) over the entire area today inhabited by Kissi speakers. The colonization movements of individual clans followed narrow strips stretching in a general north-south direction which can be traced along the lines of villages inhabited by members of these clans. For example, when the kamaa (kamara) clan crossed the Makona, its members first settled at Kpando from where their descendants built Kpasinbedu, Wuledu, Solape, Sielo and Bandilo.<sup>2</sup>

Except for very large villages, the village is the locus of one clan or a major village. There are about 17 clans dispersed over the entire Kissi area.<sup>3</sup> Members of a clan share the same food taboo and marry exogamously. Within the same settlement, members of one clan also share land which is held under communal tenure.

The historical origins of the clans are largely unknown at present even though most Kissi clans have historical and genealogical relations to Malinke clans and their clans have equivalencies with Malinke *dyamouw*.

For example, Malinke traditions assert that during the Sosso invasion under Sumanguru Kanté one of the brothers of Sundiata escaped and

fled south to the area of Kissidougou where his inhabitants are still known under the name of *Leno*.<sup>4</sup> According to folk etymology the escapee exclaimed at his arrival "*an bara kisi*" (*we are saved*)<sup>5</sup> The Keita are known among the Kissi as Farmaya Keita and inhabit the canton of the same name to the north of Kissidougou (cf. map).<sup>6</sup>

The northern part of Kissi country is characterized by a high degree of assimilation between Kissi and the larger Malinké, and Kissi language and traditional religion survive in their original forms only in the southern parts. In that respect, the Kissi colonies inside Liberia seem to represent a more authentic form of Kissi society even though here, too, a fair degree of assimilation with Bande society – a southern Mande ethnic group – has occurred.

Perhaps it was the greater organization and centralization of surrounding societies which so enhanced their prestige in the eyes of the Kissi people that they chose the ethnic affiliation of the former to the detriment of the latter and attempted to imitate their political organization in chiefdoms. At the end of the nineteenth century, the dispersed Kissi villages and hamlets were incorporated into the larger territorial federation of Samori and war chiefs, who owed him allegiance at the periphery of his empire.

One of those was **Kai Lundu** who rose through a series of victories over several of his equals and consolidated their territories into a fief of dependent sub chiefs. His parents came from Mende country, his father from Bombali and his mother from Luawa chiefdom, but resided among the Kissi in Wonde when their son was born.<sup>7</sup> Kai Lundu therefore claimed Kissi affiliation and is regarded by many Kissi as one of theirs. But after his father's death, he chose to cross the Makona and live among the Mende. He intervened – assisted with men – on the side of the Luawa chief Bondo against a rival chief – Dawa from .... – and they defeated him in the so-called Kpove war of 1880.<sup>8</sup> Bondo then gave him a title in Luawa chiefdom which got him recognized as a Mende chief. After consolidating his rule in Luawa, he reached out into upper Bombali chiefdom, and then claimed authority over the Kissi sections in the north and east of Luawa, namely Tengi, Tongi and Kamaa<sup>9</sup>, as well as Tengia. Prior to 1890 he also invaded Wonde, Kamaa and Mafessa sections to the north of the Makona (Moa) river and attached them to his chiefdom, but on his return learnt that one of Dawa's lieutenants – who had been settled in Guma by Dawa – had risen, raided Luawa and even killed Bondo. This lieutenant was called Mbawulume.<sup>10</sup> Kai Lundu assured himself of the loyalty of the chiefs in Dia, Mando, Malema and upper Bombali, and marched on Guma and drove away Mbawulume.

As he followed him eastward, he came into contact with the Kissi who lived south of the Makona and close to the Gbande. A chief Fobe from Yawiazu (called Jenne by the Muslims) tried to expand his realm and had apparently allied himself with the Bande chief of Kolahun and the Kissi of Luankoli gave refuge to Mbawulume and even attacked the Kissi in Tengia. Chief Makala from that latter section sent a message to Kai Lundu to request his assistance. He sent his warriors to devastate the Luankoli and Vassa sections: they destroyed Yawiazu and captured Fobe, and returned with a long train of slaves, cattle and other trophies, among which Fobe's head. Kai Lundu then installed a new chief in Vassa (the Gbande Hasala chiefdom), Fabana Fara, who remained loyal to him.<sup>11</sup> Luankoli, however, called on the chief of the Wam section, Soalé, and asked for powerful war fetishes. They apparently obtained those as they drove out the Mende from Luankoli, with assistance of Toma *so-fas*, after 7 years of occupation. These latter captured Foya Kamaa and killed Kai Lundu's head warrior.<sup>12</sup>

Dating of these events is tentative but available evidence suggests 1889-90 as period of Kai Lundu's raid into Kono country<sup>13</sup>, and 1890-91 as start of the Bande-Mende hostilities. My Kissi oral sources agree that the war lasted for 3 years, and thus agree with the documentary sources<sup>14</sup> Thus Luankoli had been under Kai Lundu from 1887 to 1894. Therefore, I suggest to revise the dates of Mbawulume's escape and Kai Lundu's pursuit into Liberia to 1890-91.<sup>15</sup>

During the last year of the conflict, Bande chief Bombo of Kolahun, who had concluded a treaty with the British in 1891, was killed by another Bande chief, Momo Bahomi who called in Mbawulume and his *so-fas* from Pandemai. Pandemai was apparently a reservoir of warriors under Muslims and a Toma chief loyal to Samori who, as we remember, was pursued by the French Colonel Combes in 1891 and Commdt. Briquetot of Kouroussa and retreated towards Sierra Leone.

Kai Lundu died in april 1895 and Sierra Leone Governor Cardew attended his funeral and recognized his speaker *Fa Bunde* as his successor and had all chiefs of Luawa promise allegiance to him.<sup>16</sup> But the Anglo-Liberian border commission fixed the border such that Kai Lundu's capital *Kanrelahun* came to lie within Liberia. But the British remained there until Liberia could effectively occupy its hinterland and police the border, and only vacated the area east of the frontier<sup>17</sup>.

Mbawulume pretended that the Guma chiefs called him and returned and punished some Guma chiefs who had recognized Fabunde in march and

april 1897. Thereupon the Sierra Leone Governor sought Liberian permission to cross the border and sent a detachment of the West African Frontier Police to destroy Mbawulume's camp in September 1897.<sup>18</sup>

At this time a Kissi subchief, Kafura, who had earlier risen against Kai Lundu, began to contest Fabunde and planned to detach his Kissi from the Luawa chiefdom. Apparently he contacted the French at Kissidugu and tried to convince them that he had legitimate claims to be Kai Lundu's successor and obtained "tirailleurs Sénégalais" to penetrate south of the 1892 Franco-Liberian border, and raided the Kissi Tongi section. The same Frontier Police detachment drove him away in May 1897, and he was compelled to attend a peace council in November and agree to keep peace with Fabunde.<sup>19</sup>

The Tengia section under chief Towe had kept its traditional allegiance with Luawa chiefdom, but Mbawulume prepared to march on Kailahun with a army mixed of Bande, Belle and Toma *so-fas* and devastated Tengia. The Frontier Police entered Liberia again and destroyed his headquarters at Kolahun.<sup>20</sup>

But this same year the 'Hut Tax War' broke out among the Mende, and many rebellious Mende chiefs escaped into Liberia after their defeat and sought protection from their Kissi 'playmates'. One of the leaders of the revolt, chief Nyagwa of Panguma chiefdom, sought refuge with Kafura, along with his sons and sub-chiefs. From Wonde they raided across the Anglo-Liberian border, the Meli river, into British territory until, by January 1899, the Frontier Police came with two companies and an artillery detachment and destroyed Kenema, the headquarter of Kafura and his allies without encountering resistance.<sup>21</sup> Fabunde continued operations against the retreating bands of Kafura and his allies, chief Bona from Temessadu, and Mende chiefs of Mando and Woroma in Bombali.<sup>22</sup> But Kafura's Mende hosts continued to raid Fabunde's villages, so that in March the Frontier Police sent another expeditionary corps against Koraaro near Kenema. After the destruction of that town, the Kissi sent peace messengers, but the Mende chiefs – the principal ones being Mogbi, Nyagwa's first son, and Vonie Fumbo, Nyagwa's war chief - only surrendered in July<sup>23</sup>

### Multi-Colonial Times

Kafura kept raiding across the river and the Anglo-Liberian frontier. In March 1905., the British sent another force against Kenema and destroyed it for the second time. Kafura then withdrew across the

mafessa river, where Sapouyo, chief of Sampouyara, gave him asylum, horses, guns and warriors. The British government decided to keep its Frontier Force beyond its frontier in Liberian territory and fortified the village of Wulade, some 5 km north of the Makona on the Mafesso river, and made it HQ of two companies. On July 6, 1906, the British organized a chiefs' meeting in Wulade – under the eyes of the garrison – and an 'election' of two chiefs to replace Kafura: Bawa for eastern, and Kimbo for western Wonde. Both chiefs had been previously deposed by Kafura. Also, clan sub chiefs were elected : for Kamaa Furawoi, for Toli Beri, and for Lengobengi Yigbo, while affairs in Tongi and Yumo remained still unsettled for the moment.<sup>24</sup>

Meanwhile the French commander claimed that Liberia had given them the right to patrol and police the border since the border agreement of 1885, came and arrived at Wam and Tengia in August 1906. Kafura came with them and spread rumours that the French would reinstate him in Wonde.<sup>25</sup> This created excitement on the eastern bank of the Mafessa and raids into Wonde. One of the chiefs, Bona from Temessadu, led a series of attacks on the elected chiefs between October and December 1906 and even attacked the British garrison at Wulade, whose thirty soldiers retreated.<sup>26</sup> However, the French from Sampouyara, which they had made HQ of a military district, controlled the east bank of the Mafessa and claimed to have punished Bona for his December attacks.<sup>27</sup>

In December 1906 a Liberian Frontier Force detachment with 200 men under Lieutenant William Lomax – a son-in-law of vice President Howard had arrived in Kailahun for the purpose of patrolling the frontier. As the Department of State had heard that French forces were inside Liberian territory and collected taxes around Beledu, it instructed Lomax to proceed there. However, Lomax, despite his plans to open a road from Kailahun to Yalamba, a Kissi trade center, he apparently never crossed the Makona river,<sup>28</sup> but opened a line of customs stations along the border for the collection of revenue. The British West African Frontier Force continued punitive raids across the Mafessa against Bona's allies. Kafura, invited to a peace council at Wulade, sent his brother, as he was apparently taken into French custody at Kissidougou where he offered his submission along with claims to the left bank of the Mafessa.<sup>29</sup>

Lomax and his force created so much unrest in the border area between January and August 1907 that the French decided to renegotiate the frontier with the Liberian government, and the British also suggested a readjustment of the frontier beyond Kailahun, Fabunde's residence. It exchanged Kai Lundu's chiefdom, which had fallen to Liberia, for a triangle between the Mano and Morro rivers and a cash payment of £

3000. But the Liberian government protracted the negotiations until January 1911, when a new Anglo-Liberian boundary convention was signed.<sup>30</sup>

The 1892 Franco-Liberian frontier – which ran in a straight line between Kissidougou and Beyla – was moved south to the Meli river by the 1907 border treaty. The British garrison at Wulade was therefore in French territory and handed over to France by November 11, 1911. Most of the Kissi chiefs had already accepted French rule, under the provision that Kafura was not allowed to return, but some opposition to French rule continued until 1911.<sup>31</sup>

The years 1901 till 1911 were full of conflict between the Kissi and the Liberian Frontier Force. Not only was Lomax trying to collect the debts from the Kissi chiefs which they had with each other, but he used force, and had burnt two villages, whereupon he was attacked at Koindu in April 1907.

As a consequence, the British government requested Lomax and his force to be removed from the border within a distance of 25 miles.

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<sup>1</sup> Perhaps only in the 1850s

<sup>2</sup> Massing, Kissi Fieldnotes, Tamba Taylor, Sielo, April 1969

<sup>3</sup>

<sup>4</sup> E. Leynaud et Yousouf Cissé, Paysans Malinké du Haut Niger, (Bamako, 1978), 29

<sup>5</sup> D.T. Niane, Sundiata ou l'épopée Mandingue, (Paris, 1960) 3<sup>e</sup> édition, 81

<sup>6</sup> Leynaud, Cissé, 29

<sup>7</sup> Colonial Office, Confidential Print (hereafter CO.CP), vol. 879/49 no. 533.15, March 10, 1896

<sup>8</sup> W.R.E Clarke, "The Foundation of Luawa Chiefdom", Sierra Leone Studies, 1957, 254-5

<sup>9</sup> The later chiefdoms of Teng, Tong and Kama of Sierra Leone

<sup>10</sup> Wunde, Kamo, Mofessor in the article by K. Wylie; see also Massing, Anderson all in LSJ

<sup>11</sup> K.Wylie, Notes, 171; also Massing, Kissi Fieldnotes, Ahma Jawajei, dec. 1968; Ngolo Ndama april 1969

<sup>12</sup> CO.CP 879/41 oct.10, 1894 and Massing, Kissi Fieldnotes Ahma Jawajei, dec. 1968; Ngolo Ndama april 1969

<sup>13</sup> CO.CP 879/42, March 1, 1895

<sup>14</sup> CO.CP 879/41 no. 98 "War has been existing between the Gizzi and Gbande for over three years."

CO.CP 879/42 no. 123 "War that has been going on for four years and more between Kailundu and the Kissi, Bandemeh and Bandeh chiefs." 879/49 533 "Kailundu has for the last three years been in a chronic state of war not only with a rebellious chief named Kafara but with the Sofas of Bandemeh", June 9, 1894

<sup>15</sup> I had earlier indicated 1896 as the year of Mbawulum's reception by Fobe, "History of the Belle", LSJ III, 2, 1970-71. But 1896 was the year in which he was driven out from Guma a second time, this time by the West African Frontier Force, where he apparently had returned to after Kai Lundu's death in 1895.

<sup>16</sup> CO.CP 879/48, 261 Encl. 1, dec. 20, 1897; 268 Encl.1, jan.28, 1898.

<sup>17</sup> CO.CP 879/49 no.533, no. 15, mar. 10, 1896. the area between Koindo, Foya and Kangama.

<sup>18</sup> CO.CP 879/48, 522 no. 151 Enclosures-

<sup>19</sup> CO.CP 879/48, 259, Encl.1, jan. 1898

<sup>20</sup> CO.CP 879/48, 261, Encl.1, jan 31, 1898

<sup>21</sup> This is Kenema in Guinée, in the Moundeke section, close to Wunde.

<sup>22</sup> CO.CP 879/59, 589, no.54, Encl.12, feb.12, 1899

<sup>23</sup> CO.CP 879/59, 589, no. 63, mar.27, 1899; no.72, apr.14, 1899; no.79, Encl. july-aug. 1899

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