



## Cahiers d'études africaines

162 | 2001  
Varia

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### Princes as highway men

A consideration of the phenomenon of armed banditry in precolonial Borgu\*

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#### Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesafriaines/90>

DOI: 10.4000/etudesafriaines.90

ISSN: 1777-5353

#### Publisher

Éditions de l'EHESS

#### Printed version

Date of publication: 1 January 2001

Number of pages: 333-350

ISBN: 978-2-7132-1390-8

ISSN: 0008-0055

#### Electronic reference

Olayemi Akinwumi, « Princes as highway men », *Cahiers d'études africaines* [Online], 162 | 2001, Online since 12 June 2004, connection on 19 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesafriaines/90> ; DOI : 10.4000/etudesafriaines.90

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## Princes as Highway Men

A Consideration of the Phenomenon of Armed Banditry  
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The Kano-Gonja and Sokoto-Badagry trade routes that went through Borgu-land until the end of the nineteenth century brought enormous wealth to the country. However, the portion of these routes that passed Borgu were infested with Swadio (Batonu name for armed bandits)<sup>1</sup>. The incessant activities of these bandits had negative consequences on the country. First, it dented the image of the nation. In Clapperton's *Journal of a Second Expedition into the Interior of Africa*, Borgu was referred to as a nation of robbers (Clapperton 1829: 67). Governor Ballot of Dahomey, at the early stage of French imperialism, justified the invasion of Borgu in the interest of civilization. He referred to the Bariba (Borgawa) as 'incorrigible robbers' (Hirshfield 1979: 109). Second, it affected the economy of the concerned states, which relied mostly on the revenue from the trade. Indeed, by the beginning of the twentieth century, most of these states had collapsed. This paper, therefore, focuses on the activities of these robbers and the impact on Borgu country. But first, we examine the political and economic dynamics of Borgu society which led to the emergence and promotion of

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\* I wish to express my gratitude to the following people for their comments on the first draft: Professor Ade Obayemi (now late) of University of Ilorin, Professor Dr. George Elwert (Freie Universität, Berlin), Dr. Paulo Farias (Centre for West African Studies, Birmingham), Richard Kuba and Ertmute Alber (University of Frankfurt and Freie Universität, Berlin respectively). Finally to the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation for granting the award to come to Germany. The visit enabled me to have access to some of the literature to update this paper.

Armed banditry is taken to mean acts of predation and violence against merchants on the trade routes. See Ray KEA 'I am here to plunder. . .', in Donald CRUMMEY, ed. (1986: 11). In this paper, bandit and robber means the same.

1. Swadio is a Batonu word for a bandit. It means 'somebody who eats on the road'. In other words, somebody whose survival depends on booties from the caravan traders.

Swadibu (the act of banditry in Batonu language) in such a large scale in the nineteenth century<sup>2</sup>.

It is also important to mention the fact that armed banditry is not a new field of study. It has attracted the attention of many scholars across the globe. One of such scholars was Eric Hobsbawm (1981: 78) who through his concept “social banditry” has influenced many scholars to examine the appropriateness of the concept in African context. The result of their various examinations is the publication of the book on *Banditry, Rebellion and Social Protest in Africa* (Crummey 1986). The term “warlords” is more appropriate to the situation in Borgu as would be seen in our discussion.

### Precolonial Political Economy of Borgu

Borguland is roughly enclosed by the ninth and twelfth parallels of the latitude and the first and fourth meridians of east longitude, with an area of 40,000 sq. km (Anene 1965). Borgu extends from the northeast and eastern Bank of the river Niger to westward of the Alibony mountains and in the south to the rain forest of the border of Yorubaland (*ibid.*). As a result of the 1898 Anglo-French pact, Borguland was partitioned into British Borgu (which today is Nigeria), and the French Borgu (which today is in the Republic of Benin) (Anene 1970; Hirshfield 1979).

The inhabitants are variously referred to as Bariba and Borgawa by their Yoruba and Hausa neighbours respectively. These people were not a homogeneous group, but were brought together by the ruling class who shared the same ancestry<sup>3</sup>. Among the groups that inhabited Borgu included the Bisa, Boko, Bokobaru and the Batonu. Some of the states established by the groups include Bussa, Illo, Kaiama, Kenu, Yashikira, Okuta, Ilesha, Gwanara (all in Nigeria) and Nikki, Paraku, Kandi, Kounde, Segbana (all in the Republic of Benin). Based on the common ancestry of the ruling class, the various states allied together on several occasions to defend the territorial integrity of their country against powerful states of Songhay, Dahomey, Oyo and the Sokoto Caliphate, with its centres of power in Gwandu, Nupe and Ilorin in northern Nigeria (Akinwumi 1992a).

According to the information collected on the field<sup>4</sup>, banditry began in the fifteenth century with the opening up of Borgu to the outside world

2. There was no European account in the nineteenth century that did not mention armed banditry in Borgu. This period also witnessed more traders participating in the trade because of the prosperity associated with it. Also it must be pointed out that the women were not left out.
3. The ruling class traced their origin to Kisra. For details see M. H. STEWART (1980).
4. Interview with Sule Idris at his Ilorin residence, September 2nd, 1992. Most of the informations collected on the field come from oral interviews with: Idrissu Banikani at his Kaiama residence, September 5th, 1992; Sule Idris, *op. cit.*; Maurat Kissira at his Nikki residence, Benin Republic, July 16th, 1992; Ishaq Sabi at his Ilorin residence, July 23th, 1993; I. Wara at his Bussa residence, July 16th, 1992; and Abdulrahman Mora at his Ilorin residence, September 30th, 1992.

through trade. Before the fifteenth century, according to some of my informants<sup>5</sup>, there was no act of banditry because land, which was the basic of economic activity, was communally owned and distributed free by lineage heads who were appointed based on the customs of the people<sup>6</sup>. In other words, everybody was gainfully employed principally in agriculture. Indeed, the society recognized the less fortunate and steps were taken to cater for them so as to discourage robbery. This period was the age of agrarianism<sup>7</sup>.

The fifteenth century witnessed a transformation from agrarianism to mercantilism. It was the period when kolanut was discovered in Asante forest. The discoveries led to the migration of first, the Wagara, and later, the Gambari (Hausa), to all the settlements along the trade routes from Hausaland to Gonja. In Borgu, the Wagara were established in Djougou, Kandi, Ilo, Paraku, Nikki, Kaiama, Perere, Goudibere, etc. (Idris 1973). These merchants were to effect the change to mercantilism.

A lot has been written on the activities of the merchant groups to detain us here, but suffices it to say that these merchants were the wealthy people in Borgu (Lovejoy 1973, 1980; Stewart 1979; Adekunle 1994: 55). Two categories of these merchants could be identified. The itinerant merchants and the settled merchants. The former went from state to state to buy and to sell, while the latter were permanently settled in Borgu, as the case with other states, controlling the trade by acting as the middle-men to their colleagues, the itinerant traders. M. H. Stewart (1979: 287) describes in details the activities of the settled merchants thus:

“The merchants of the diaspora communities possessed information concerning the movement of goods, shortages, and excesses within the trading network. They extended credit and excesses within the trading network. They extended credit and acted as intermediaries between the long-distance traders and the merchants whose goods they bought and sold and, in times of plenty, goods were sometimes stockpiled by them until such time as they were in short supply and could command higher prices”.

The involvement of the Wasangari in the banditry could be explained by the unequal access of the different sections of the group to the economic resources of the country. For the purpose of this paper, we identify two categories of the Wasangari. The first group is the privileged group. The Wasangari in this group were people in power and those in the corridors of power. Because they were in power, they controlled and monopolized all the resources coming into the various states. These resources came from slave trade, tributes from provincial and divisional chiefs, war booty, caravan tolls and market tolls (Idris 1973: 107). Some of these were redistributed to the other Wasangari and their peasants during important festivals.

5. Interview with Sule Idris and I. Wara, see previous note.

6. Interview with I. Wara, see note 4.

7. See Ray KEA, *op. cit.*, for his account on banditry in the Gold Coast.

The percentage was rather too small to go round and as a result, not all of them were able to benefit from the exercise.

The other group of the Wasangari, for the purpose of this paper, is identified as the less privileged Wasangari. They were, in most cases, those who lost out in political contest for the control of the political stools and those who were not directly connected to the incumbency in Borguland. They became warlords robbing the caravan merchants of their goods, raiding the Fulani of the cattle and abducting and selling the peasants into slavery. Not only that, as warlords, they offered their services to the caravan traders, for a price, as security guards on the routes through Borgu (*ibid.*). However, raiding the caravan traders of their goods was the fastest means of acquiring the necessary wealth out of all other options mentioned above. It was never considered as a crime but seen as a mode of access to the resources monopolized by a section of the group of the Wasangari and a normal method of procuring their annual supply of salt (Orr 1965: 86).

Allied to the above, the political situation in Borgu encouraged banditry. As discussed elsewhere, the Wasangari (the Kisra migrants) successfully displaced the aborigines and imposed their rule in the fifteenth century (Akinwumi 1992b). The new administration, at the various centres of power, gave prominence to force and wealth as means of assuming offices in Borgu. The successful candidate to any vacant position was the most powerful and the wealthier of the candidates. The less privileged Wasangari knew these conditions and since the ultimate objective of any Wasangari was to occupy their ancestral throne, a way had to be found to acquire wealth. René Faurite (1987: 90) writes that an aspiring candidate has to be rich to command respect and to draw supporters.

Also, banditry was used as a means of political regulation. Some of the princes involved were rivals of the incumbent kings, or sometimes princes of rival states. The latter usually conducted their raids to weaken the security or claim of supremacy over their neighbours. Indeed, one should not that the second half of the nineteenth century witnessed serious rivalry between the newly independent states. Mora Tasude of Kaiama complained bitterly to Lugard of the activities of Bakin Jakin of Basoro (Gwasoro), who was always raiding his country (Perham 1963: 158-159).

In sum, the new political economy, as witnessed from the fifteenth century, gave birth to banditry. It must, however, be stated that the incidence of armed robbery was not high until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Two major factors were responsible for this. One, the high demand for kolanut in Hausaland attracted more traders, including women, in the business. The route through Borgu provided the shortest route to the source of kolanut in Gonja. Two, the development at the coastal regions of the sub-continent. The abolition of slave trade paved the way for the legitimate trade. As a result, European goods, most especially guns and gunpowder, were in high demand in the interior. The merchants were the agents through which these goods could be acquired.

## Kano-Gonja/Sokoto-Badary Routes

Precise date for the opening of these trade routes could not be easily known but, with respect to Kano-Gonja route, it must have been in the fifteenth century. This was the period when the production of gold in the old Ghana region was stopped and the period when kolanut, which became the alternative exchange product, was discovered in the Gonja area of Akan country (Lovejoy 1971, 1974). It was also the period when the Wagara traders, who were to become prominent along the route (from the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries), were established in Borgu country (Wilks 1961; Al-Hajj 1968). The control of the route was later taken over by the enterprising Hausa traders from the eighteenth century (Lovejoy 1971).

The *Kano Chronicle* and *Ta'rikhal Fettach* also supported our fifteenth century date. The *Kano Chronicle* states that a commercial route linking Kano to Gonja was opened during the reign of king Ya qub (1452-1463). Furthermore, the *Chronicle* states that it was around this period that kolanut was introduced to Hausaland (Palmer 1928: 97). *Ta'rikhal Fettach*, on the other hand, mentions Borgu as the place one could get the best kolanuts in West Africa in the fifteenth century. Borgu country, though not known for kolanut production, however prospered on it, perhaps as a result of its location and also because of the Gonja market which was opened around the fifteenth century.

From Kano, there were two routes leading to Gonja. The first, the northern route, passed through Sansanne Mango, Mamprussie, and Yendi to Salaga and other Asante dominated markets (Lovejoy 1971: 538), and the second route, which we are focusing on, went further south through most of the Borgu states. This route crossed the Niger at Ilo, a commercial port of Borgu, to Bussa, Wawa, Kaiama, Nikki, Djougou, and then Gonja (Harris 1939: 28). Apart from this route, there was also a feeder route which linked other Borgu states to the major route (Hallett 1965: 96). The Borgu route was the shorter and therefore the more preferred of the two routes. Lander, who went through Borgu in the early nineteenth century, reported seeing "about a thousand [Hausa] individuals of both sexes" along the Borgu route (*ibid.*).

Because of the strategic location of some Borgu states along the route, custom houses were established in all the states that the route passed through. Custom houses were established for various reasons. Among these were: one, to regulate trading activities in these states; two, for security reasons (i.e. to keep eyes on the spies pretending to be traders); and most importantly, to collect tolls from traders making use of the routes<sup>8</sup>. The toll collected from these traders, as Goody (1971: 51) notes, was the only source of revenue for some states.

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8. Interview with Sule Idris, *op. cit.*, note 4.

Bussa, because of its strategic location (it bordered the Niger at the navigable portion), enabled it to control the trade through its territory. The control included providing transport and other services to the traders. Clapperton (1829: 109) reported that the king had a big ferry at come (komi) or Wonjerqa-s to transport “the caravan to and from Houssa Nyffe [Nupe]”. The custom house at Illo was also important. It was at Illo that all Hausa merchants, especially from the eighteenth century when these merchants took control of the Gonja market, had to cross the Niger to Borguland. The control of that port was however controversial. While some held the view that it was Nikki that controlled the port, others strongly believed it was Bussa. The evidence at our disposal however supported Bussa control of the port<sup>9</sup>.

Another important custom house at Wawa, which by the second half of the nineteenth century had declared its independence from Bussa. Wawa was a fortified city with four toll gates. These toll gates—“Fakun Bani lea”, “Bisa We ‘te Beni-lea”, “Kaiama Beni-lea” and “Lesu Beni-lea”—all led to important markets in the region<sup>10</sup>. Sir John Glover reported seeing a large caravan at Wawa on its way to Salaga. According to him, the caravan consisted of 150 slaves, 32 horses, 26 donkeys and about 301 slaves for sale (Hastings 1926: 156-157).

Kaiama too was strategically located on the trade route and indeed, going by Clapperton’s account (1829: 77), the route from Hausaland and Bornu went through Kaiama to Gonja. Dupuis (1966: 45) confirms the position of Kaiama by describing the city as a large city situated on the trade route (Idris 1973: 180). The revenue derived from the caravan trade must have been responsible for the declaration of her independence of Nikki in the nineteenth century<sup>11</sup>.

Nikki was, during the time until discussion, the most important and powerful state in Borguland. The importance was not only in politics, but also in economy. Most of the custom houses were located at the provincial states. Three of these were the Bodebere, Djougou and Parakou custom houses<sup>12</sup>. The Bodebere custom house bordered the Yorubaland and was used by Yoruba merchants. It was formerly a transit camp for traders and Muslims scholars going to Salaga, but eventually developed into a commercial town (NAK/DOB/71).

9. Archival materials support that Illo was under Bussa’s control until it was given to Sokoto to compensate her for losing some of her territories to the French as a result of the Anglo-French pact of 1898.

10. The custom gates were effectively under the control of Wawa.

11. Kaiama was one of the states established from Nikki in the seventeenth century. By the middle of the nineteenth century, it had declared her independence of Nikki and until the imposition of colonial rule, Kaiama succeeded in defending her independence in spite of the threat posed by the powerful Yoruba kingdom of Oyo.

12. Interview with Sule Idris, *op. cit.*, note 4.

Nikki market was very important to many merchants because of its central position. According to many of my informants, Nikki was the destination of many merchants from Kumasi and Salaga, where they would sell their goods to traders coming from Hausaland and return home (Wara 1983: 25). The toll gates at Nikki, therefore, yielded more revenue. The gates were under the supervision of Ba-Parakpe and Bio Sonkora, who were responsible for collecting the dues on the goods coming and going out of Nikki. They were also responsible for granting right of passage to individual passing through Nikki. These officers, especially Ba-Parakpe had become wealthy in the course of performing his duties as a result of gifts received from traders or not declaring the total amount received from the traders<sup>13</sup>.

It should also be mentioned that gold imported from Gonja markets was minted at Nikki into a fixed currency called Mithqal. This was accepted at a fixed rate for all transactions along the Gonja-Kano trade route. This attracted more merchants to Nikki and, indirectly, brought about increase in custom fees.

The Sokoto-Badagary route was opened in response to the European activities at the coast. This was properly in the nineteenth century. This trade route went through Yorubaland to Borgu and to Sokoto (NAK/DOB/AR/17). Some of the states in Borguland that the route went through included Yangwasso, Konkwesso, Okuta, Boria, Shiya, Yashikira, and Gure (NAK/DOB/71). It was through this route that most of the European goods got to Borgu at a reasonable price (Lander 1830: 134).

As with the case of Kano-Gonja route, states along the Sokoto-Badagary route also established custom houses from where tolls were collected from the various merchants making use of the route. The custom houses survived that of the Kano-Gonja (NAK/ASA/24). It was on July 12, 1907 that the last custom house at Ilesha was closed down. This was after the collection of tolls was made illegal by the British colonial government in Nigeria in April, 1907 (*ibid.*).

Oral tradition confirms that tolls were collected on all goods, most especially military wares. The fees were not fixed and were most especially in cash<sup>14</sup>. Lugard, in 1896, reported that "there is no fixed duty for the merchants to pay, but the chief takes just as much as can be squeezed from them" (Anene 1970: 120). Clapperton (1829: 299) tries to give an idea of what was charged in Borgu. In Bussa, 30,000 cowries were reported collected from traders crossing river Oli (10,000 cowries per head and 20,000 for the loads). This was rather too exorbitant. Apart from the tolls collected, gifts were forcefully, in some instances, from the merchants for the chiefs. Failure to cooperate often resulted in delaying the traders from

13. Interview with Maurat Kissira, *op. cit.*, note 4.

14. Interview with Sule Idris, *op. cit.*, note 4.



proceeding, confiscating of their goods or passing information to bandits to raid the traders of their goods<sup>15</sup>.

At present, there is yet no statistics either from oral or documentary evidence to suggest the annual revenue accruable to each state from the various custom houses in Borguland. But going from the various reports of the early travelers, especially Clapperton's account, the revenue must be substantial (*ibid.*).

Revenue derived from the custom houses was used for state purposes. Though, in all the cases, it was always difficult to differentiate between the state's and the King's purse. Whatever the case, Nikki, which derived more revenue from the caravan trade, was able to set up a larger bureaucracy than any of the states in Borgu. Offices with designated responsibilities were created and appointees were paid from the state coffers.

Also, part of the revenue was used to recruit soldiers and to equip the military. We mentioned briefly above that military wares were heavily taxed, and, in some cases, these wares—for example horses, gun, and gunpowder—were directly purchased by some of the states. When the horses were in short supply, more were imported to Borgu through Illo port. Richard Lander (1830: 134) wrote about the military strength of Nikki in the nineteenth century thus: "Nikki is the most powerful of the Borgu states. . . Its monarch property and he is, in other respects, wealthy and affluent. His soldiers, who form a good part of the population of the capital, are reputed to be brave, bold and enterprising men".

Lander also wrote in 1830 concerning Wawa that the monarch was recruiting "a body of Nouffe [Nupe] horse soldiers, consisting eight hundred men, which has rendered its chief more powerful than either of his neighbour" (Hermon-Hodge 1929: 149-150). Gwanara was another military state that emerged during this period. Indeed, it took the combined forces of Nikki, Ilesha, Okuta and Kenu to curb the military excesses of Gwanara (Crowder 1973).

Part of the revenue was also used to finance state activities or functions. Gani festival, for example, was a state activity which was common to all Borgu states. It was a festival which brought all the ruling elite (Wasangari) together to reaffirm their loyalty to the state. At Nikki, where the festival was more elaborated, it was celebrated with pomp and pageantry. The festival also provided the opportunity for ambitious princes to announce their candidature for existing or future vacant stool. This was done by arrogant display of wealth derived from their robbery activities (Wara 1983: 44).

Apart from the revenue derived from the various custom houses by the states on the route, assorted goods (both from the north and south) were made available to the Borgawa. Clapperton (1829: 68) reported seeing

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15. See Annex for the goods coming to Borgu in the nineteenth century.

“more European goods in Kaiama in two days more than in all time in Yorubaland”. Lander also wrote concerning another Borgu state, Djougou:

“The people have the necessities of life in great abundance and they are enriched by the thousands of merchants who trade in Gonja for the goora [kola] nut, etc. Their chief, or the king, is the most opulent ruler in the whole of Borgu having obtained by the means of more money” (Hallett 1965: 96).

It has been argued elsewhere that Borgu had nothing to offer to the traders in terms of primary product except the right of passage<sup>16</sup>. However, oral evidence at our disposal has contradicted this. Shea butter, the major product of Borgu, was required by traders from the coast, Yorubaland and at Salaga market (Idris 1973: 62). Apart from the above, some Borgawa were providing some security services and some were hired carriers at the various custom houses in Borgu. The Borgawa were therefore well involved in the commercial activities.

### Armed Banditry on Borgu Highways

The caravan traders were faced with many hazards. One of such was the attack by armed robbers. Usually, different precautions were taken against sudden attacks by these bandits. Some of these precautions included travelling in large numbers, sometimes between 1,000 and 2,000. According to Richard Roberts (1980: 176), a large caravan “definitely offered more protection” through insecure area.

Also, the caravan traders were, in most cases, well armed or engaged the services of soldiers or hunters. Caillié writes on two different groups of traders in West Africa. According to him (in Roberts *ibid.*: 176), the Malinké were always object of attack, whereas the Saracolet (Soninké) were not usually attacked because they carried arms on their trips. C. Orr (1965: 105) writes on another group of caravan traders, the Hausa traders. According to him, “Hausa traders banded together for mutual protection under a chosen leader. . . Each trader was armed with spear and knife, usually with bows and arrows as well, and regular advance and rear guards were formed by each caravan”.

Two issues should be further examined at this point in time. These are, one, that armed attack on the caravan traders was not restricted to any region in Africa. Toyin Falola (1995-1996), wrote on banditry and piracy in the nineteenth century Yorubaland. He mentioned the activities of these bandits and pirates (with active support of some top political elite) in Ibadan,

16. Mahdi Adamu was of this opinion, but evidence collected from the field contradicted this view. Borgu was noted for the production of shea butter, which was in high demand in the coastal region. The production was controlled by Borgawa women.

Ijaiye, Epe, etc. Two, is the personalities concerned. In all known cases, the ruling elite were involved, giving the impression that the attacks were sponsored by these states. R. H. Stone (Falola 1991: 23), a christian missionary, writes on Kurumi, the military leader of Ijaiye, a Yoruba state, thus: "With a number of followers, who had attached themselves to his fortunes, he [Kurumi] would go out from Ijaiye into some distant province on predatory execution. By kidnapping in the farms and plundering caravans he became rich and powerful". Donald Crummey (1986: 133) also gives the example of Ethiopia, where banditry was considered as a means to an end. According to him, "[. . .] the Ethiopia ruling class dominated the institution of banditry, and mounded it to their own ends. They used it as a tool for career mobility".

Crummey's statement on Ethiopia is true of Borgu. The Wasangari dominated the institution. Some of the Wasangari that participated in raiding and looting of the caravan traders in the nineteenth century included Bakin Jaki, a Nikki prince based at Gwasoro. According to an account in *Litafi na Tatsuniyoyi na Hausa*, Bakin Jaki was said to have captured a caravan of 2,000 pack-animals between Yashikira and Nikki. The robbery was organized with Mora Amali, a Kaiama prince who eventually became the eighth king of Kaiama in 1884<sup>17</sup>. According to the account, the two had waited for twelve years for an opportunity of that nature (Hermon-Hodge 1929: 16). Ba Kombiya, a prince of Okuta, was another notorious raider, who eventually became the king of Okuta in 1902. It was claimed that in one of his raids, he succeeded in capturing about 240 slaves (Stewart 1993: 364).

Other princes identified were Jofiri (Bodebere), Kwara (Kounde), Mora Bakaru (Kaiama), Woru Yaru (Bodebere and Yashikira), and Mora Tasude (Kaiama). The last two eventually became enemies on the account of a stolen sword, on one of their raiding activities. This affected the state relation<sup>18</sup>.

As a result of their activities, there was no route within Borguland that was secured, most especially those routes leading to major markets. Nikki, which had the most important and central market in Borgu, was more attractive to the robbers than any of the others. Some of the foreign travelers who went through Borguland were attacked within the Nikki kingdom whether on their way to or from Nikki (Perham 1963: 158-159). Other notorious routes included Kaiama, Djougou, Paraku and Perere. Wolf reported how some princes "attacked and plundered a caravan of 300 men with 90 donkeys going from Kano to Salaga". This was probably in 1891 (Crowder 1973: 33).

The participation of a large percentage of the Wasangari should not give the impression of the state support or that robbery was legalized in Borgu.

17. Interview with Abdulrahman Mora, *op. cit.*, note 4.

18. *Ibid.*

The inability of some of the states to curtail the activities of these bandits was as a result of the fact that Borgu was not a centralized polity, and also there was no law governing situation of high power differential.

### Mode of Operation

Usually, the robbers operated in gangs under the leadership of a powerful prince, who provided the weapons and also directed the operation. In some cases, the gang could be made up of about 100 to 400 robbers fully armed with bows and poisoned arrows. Lugard was warned that "a robber chief with 600 warriors had planned to attack him" (Anene 1970: 24). Bakin Jakin, one of the notorious raiders in the nineteenth century, had a gang made up of about 400 robbers on foot and 60 horsemen (Perham 1963: 158-170). And when they attacked they did so to loot the traders of their money, goods, and even captured the traders themselves and later sold them into slavery (*ibid.*: 143).

Idris (1973) confirms that the gangs were supplied necessary information about incoming caravan traders by the Muslims Imams, who were personal consultants to the princes (Wasangari). Two reasons could be attributed to this: information was given for a price; information was supplied to be in good record of the princes. As we mentioned above, most of the raiders eventually assumed the leadership of their states. In that case, the informant usually became a personal adviser to the new king.

Members of the gang were recruited based on their exploits in previous events or courage and possession of magic. Members so recruited formed the infantry section. The Calvary section was dominated by the princes and leaders of sub-units of the gang. Horses were obtained from the Hausa traders by individual princes to enhance their status. Recruited members were paid or rewarded from the booties during the expedition. Oral evidence is silent on the percentage. It must be adequate to retain the services of the bandits.

The method of attack depended on the number of the traders and the vicinity of the attack. If the caravan was large, the objective was to break up the caravan and then deal with it separately. The attack was always sudden and usually where the forest was so thick and visibility was impeded, or at a river crossing. Lugard, who had many encounters with some of the bandits, described their method thus: "[. . .] 1000 men could sit within 20 yards (or 20 ft) of the path, and the first half of the caravan could pass without any knowledge of it. At the first gap caused by a tired or lame man they could step across the path and kill the first unarmed porter who appeared and the rest would fly in panic and throw their loads" (Perham 1963: 220).

Mora Tasude, the Sarkin Kaiama and a one time raider further described the mode thus: "[. . .] either they would lie in ambush in a very thick place,

or the crossing of a river or a swamp. . . or else they would attack by night” (*ibid.*: 158-159).

The weapons of attack were horses, spears, bows and poisoned arrows. The Wasangari were mounted on the horses giving commands while the recruited peasants formed the infantry. Lugard, in one of his encounters with robbers in Borgu, was wounded by a poisoned arrow. He was saved by the appliance of local anti-poison herb given to him by his friend, the Sarkin Kaiama, Mora Tasude (NAK/SNP/7/8/1858-1907).

### The State and the Robbers

It was not that the individual state was unconcerned about the safety of the caravan route passing through the individual state, but the fragmentary nature of the political system and the relationship of the bandits to their respective governments made a joint effort by the state impossible. The safety of the routes were therefore left to the individual state, in which case some of the states had no resources to contain the robbers. However, some of the robbers were rivals of some of the monarchs and therefore took to raiding as a continuation of struggle for political power.

Nevertheless some efforts were made to safeguard the routes. Bussa monarch, for example, had a squad which was put at the service of caravan traders. Lugard was told by one of the guards that “the Bussa king is looked on as a father all through Borgu, and has a great influence. No one will touch a caravan which has one of his messengers” (Perham 1963: 144). One must however quickly add that it was not a guarantee for the safety of the traders. There were cases when the robbers could have been attacked and made away with their goods before realizing the presence of Bussa’s soldiers (*ibid.*).

At Bodebere, Nikki custom house for Yoruba traders, there was a permanent anti-robbery squad stationed there. Two or more soldiers were always given to each caravan after proper checking. This was for a fee and another source of revenue to the state (*ibid.*). In some other cases, there were states allying together to patrol<sup>19</sup>, and to open routes that were closed as a result of the activities of the robbers. In 1894, fifteenth states allied under the monarch of Paraku to open the road to Salaga infested by robbers (Perham 1963: 213).

However, in spite of the individual or combined states effort to rid the region of the activities of robbers, the robbers continued to be daring. As a result, many routes were closed, among them: from Gonja to Nikki and from Nikki to Yorubaland via Shaki (*ibid.*). The consequences of this was

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19. Interview with Sule Idris, *op. cit.*, note 4.

the boycotting of Borgu markets and the diversion of the route to other states. There was the diversion of the Sokoto-Badagry route from Kaiama to Ilesha as a result of the menace of armed robbers (*ibid.*).

### Impact on the Economy and Demography of Borgu

The frequent attacks on the caravan traders had tremendous impact on the economy of the country, which solely depended on the revenue, in form of duties, collected from the caravan traders. As we have mentioned above, the incessant attacks led not only to the boycotting of Borgu markets, it also led to the diversion of the route elsewhere. This meant loss of revenue for most of the states.

The implication of this was that there was no more fund to service the bureaucracy, to organize state programmes like festivals and to equip the army. Nikki was mostly affected by this. According to a document, "when the commerce going through Borgu declined, Nikki too declined until it was reduced to the half occupied miserable town that Lugard found it in 1895" (NAK/DOB/HIS/71).

It was not only Nikki that was affected, Bussa, Wawa and Kaiama were also affected. Kaiama was reported to have deteriorated into a mere village (Mahdi 1990: 20). At the inception of colonial rule, effort was made to re-divert the trade route to Kaiama again, but with little success (*ibid.*).

Allied to the above was the depopulation resulting from the activities of the armed robbers. The Wagara and the Hausa traders who were settled in the various Borgu states and who were actually controlling the caravan trade migrated elsewhere to establish. This would explain the reason for the sparsely populated Borgu at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Finally, one should add the fact that the creation of new frontiers, as a result of the partition of Borgu between Britain and France in 1898, destroyed what was left of the Kano-Gonja caravan trade (Crowder 1973: 99-118). The trade routes were diverted by the colonial masters to their different areas of operations.

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Borguland was strategically located along two major caravan trade routes. The location made it possible for these Borgawa states to open custom houses for collecting duties on all goods passing through the country. Though, we have no statistics from the various custom houses on the revenue collected; it must be high going by the account of some European travelers and soldiers that went through Borgu in the second half of the 19th century. Part of the revenue was used to develop these states politically and militarily.

However, the menace of armed bandits, who were princes, led to the boycotting of Borgu markets and the diversion of the routes elsewhere. The implication was that these Borgu states lost major revenue which affected the economy of the country. Consequently, at the inception of the colonial rule in 1900, most of the capitals had deteriorated into villages.

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ANNEX  
**Goods and Routes through Borgu**

Station	Goods	Traders involved	Main toll gate	Destination
From Gonja/ Salaga	Kolanuts Beads Red yams Rum Gunpowder	Wangara and Hausa traders	Djougou and Nikki	To the North especially Hausaland
From Yorubaland via Badagry	Gun Gunpowder Spirits Manchester Goods Pewter, Platers Jugs, dishes and Yoruba goods like woven cloth, Kolanuts Crafts	Yoruba	Bodebere Kaiama Ilesha Nikki	Ditto
From Nupeland (Bida)	Brass Iron Looking glass Leather work (sandals, bridles)	Nupe and Hausa	Bussa and Wava	To the south especially Yorubaland
From Hausaland	Potash (both in power and in stone), Red yarn, Antimony, Beads, Paper, Coral, Horses, Cattle, Sheep, Goats and Groundnuts	Hausa	Illo Bussa Wava	To the South i.e. Yorubaland and Gonja/ Salaga market

Sources: Compiled from Margery & Mary Bull, in PERHAM, M., ed. (1963: 189-190), STEWART (1979) and also oral evidence from Alhaji Sule Idris on 2nd September at his Ilorin residence in Nigeria.

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#### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the phenomenon of armed banditry in precolonial Borgu history. The paper considers armed banditry in Borgu as a reaction to the change from agrarianism to mercantilism in the fifteenth century. It attributes the involvement of Borgu princes in banditry to the socio-political situation in the country. The paper concludes that armed banditry, which became well pronounced in the nineteenth century, affected the main source of Borgu's economy, the caravan trade, and consequently led to the fall of many of the Borgu states. Indeed, one could say that the shift of the trade route from one area to another, and eventual boycott of Borgu routes, laid the foundation for its impoverishment at the beginning of the century.

## RÉSUMÉ

*Les princes comme bandits de grand chemin : une analyse du phénomène de banditisme armé dans le Borgu précolonial.* — Cet article analyse le banditisme armé dans l'histoire précoloniale du Borgu. Ce phénomène qui s'est produit au xv<sup>e</sup> siècle est vu comme une réaction au passage d'une économie agraire à une économie mercantile. L'entrée des princes du Borgu dans le banditisme est liée à la situation sociopolitique du pays à cette époque. Il en résulte que le banditisme armé, qui atteint son apogée au xix<sup>e</sup> siècle, affecta la source principale de l'économie, le commerce caravanier, et entraîna l'effondrement de nombreux états du Borgu. On peut même aller jusqu'à dire que le déplacement de la route commerciale d'une région à une autre, ainsi que le boycott effectif des routes commerciales du Borgu, ont conduit à son appauvrissement au début du xx<sup>e</sup> siècle.

Keywords/*Mots-clés*: Armed banditry, caravan trade, highway men, precolonial Borgu, princes/*Banditisme armé, commerce caravanier, bandit de grand chemin, Borgu précolonial, princes.*