

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Introduction

During the Lomé Conferences¹ many African countries expressed a wish for more attention for sociocultural projects in EU development programmes. In Africa there was a need for activities to promote and acknowledge the cultural identity of African peoples as expressed in their histories and value systems. The aims of such activities should include preserving and assessing the value of the countries' cultural heritage. This would have to involve inventorying, describing and protecting historical and cultural monuments, including the extensive archaeological heritage, which had hitherto been only summarily recorded. It was hoped that such broadening of knowledge would lead to a greater appreciation and understanding of African peoples and their histories in the rest of the world.

The Republic of Mali was one of the countries that signed the Lomé Conventions. The people of Mali had long ago realised that studying their history was an integral aspect of their development. Modibo Keita, the first president of Mali, encouraged Malinese students to study historical sciences outside Mali because such academic studies were not available in Mali itself. One of those students was the archaeologist Alfa Konaré, who was later to become the first democratically elected president of Mali. Because the Republic of Mali does not have the means required to finance large-scale archaeological research independently, the country often works together with foreign researchers and institutes in this field. The Netherlands has always been an important partner in such research.

I first became involved in Malinese archaeology during my participation in the *Projet Togué*, which was supervised by professor Dr J.D. van der Waals and financed by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It was led by the

Note

1. Conferences of the European Union and the African countries to the south of the Sahara, the Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries in the field of economic and commercial cooperation and also development cooperation.

Malinese *Institut des Sciences Humaines* in Bamako and took place from 1989 until 1996 in the southern part of the Inland Niger Delta. The *Projet Togué* was a regional part of a national survey intended to make an inventory of the archaeological heritage of Mali. It marked the beginning of my great love for this country, its history and its people.

I was offered an opportunity to conduct my doctoral research into ‘The pre- and protohistoric *togué* of the Niger alluvial plain, Mali. A multi-scale archaeo-geographical approach’ from 1 May 1994 until 1 May 1998. This research was subsidised by the *Stichting voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek van de Tropen* (WOTRO Science for Global Development; dossier number W28-372), part of the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO). I was appointed to the former Faculty of Pre- and Protohistory of the University of Leiden as a trainee research assistant for a period of four years. My research comprised a regional survey in the southern Inland Niger Delta in Mali.

Three months after my contract ended, by which time I had not yet completed my doctoral thesis, the *Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde* (RMV; National Museum of Ethnology) in Leiden offered me a job as field director of a large international archaeological research project in Mali (1 October 1998 until 1 October 2002). This research, for which the museum was responsible, was financed by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs in The Hague. It was to take place at Dia, one of the largest archaeological sites in the southern Inland Niger Delta. I would never have been able to accept this challenge without the four years’ experience I gained during my doctoral research.

Contrary to my doctoral research, which I carried out mainly independently with the necessary and dedicated support of the *Institut des Sciences Humaines* in Mali, the excavation at Dia was a collaborative project. It was financed and organised in the Netherlands and involved various universities and institutes in the Netherlands, Belgium, France, England and Mali. The project was led by the *Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde*, represented by professor Dr R.M.A. Bedaux and myself. In England the project was supervised by Dr K. MacDonald of the University College in London. We also cooperated with professor Dr J. Polet of the Sorbonne (Paris I) and Dr A. Person of the Université Pierre et Marie Curie (Paris VI) in France, and with Dr O. Gosselain (Université Libre de Bruxelles) in Belgium. In Mali the project was supported by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, the *Mission Culturelle de Djenné* and the Ministry of Education and Sciences. Dr S. Sidibé of the *Musée National du Mali*, Dr K. Sanogo of the *Institut des Sciences Humaines*, Dr B. Diaby of the *Mission Culturelle de Djenné* and professor Dr D. Konaté of the University of Bamako were responsible for the scientific cooperation with Mali. It was this exceptional cooperation that turned this excavation project into an example of archaeological cooperation in Africa on

an international scale. The excavation at Dia is one of the largest international excavations carried out south of the Sahara.

This dissertation discusses both the results of my doctoral research and my contribution to the monograph on the Dia excavation.