



**HAL**  
open science

## Invention of boundaries and identity issues in the story of an anti-colonial war

Cécile Leguy

► **To cite this version:**

Cécile Leguy. Invention of boundaries and identity issues in the story of an anti-colonial war. TYD-SKRIF VIR LETTERKUNDE, 2023, Mbuyu 1, 60 (3), pp.5-16. 10.17159/tl.v60i3.14380 . halshs-04342879

**HAL Id: halshs-04342879**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04342879>**

Submitted on 17 Dec 2023

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution - ShareAlike 4.0 International License

# Invention of boundaries and identity issues in the story of an anti-colonial war

Cécile Leguy

Publié dans *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde*, volume 60 (3), 2023 (collection Mbuyu 1).  
(version auteur)

## Abstract

To what extent do verbal arts contribute to the imposition of worldviews, and indeed to the redrawing of boundaries? I chose to address this question through a performance recital to commemorate a historical event, recorded during a festival organized by a cultural association with the aim of defending the Bwa minority in Mali. The event took place in San in December 2001 and was intended to prepare for the centenary of what is commonly known as the “Bwa revolt”, a resistance movement that took place during the First World War. The study of the recital invites one to question the part of identity reconstruction expressed in this commemoration of the revolt. In this article I argue that the vision of the revolt’s history such as it is proposed in this performance has the effect of inventing boundaries, even though it is a call to integrate into a larger whole. It highlights what can be understood as a paradoxical injunction. Indeed, the public is called to ‘be part of’ a country, while claiming as specific to the Bwa of Mali an event that belongs to the history of a whole region not only populated by the Bwa, and that goes far beyond the borders of what Mali is today. In this performance, one thus witnesses an ethnicization that is built on a rewriting of history, an ethnicization that is also remarkable in the comments exchanged on the commemoration of the revolt on social networks. This article is organized into three points. Firstly, the context of this anti-colonial war and the way it is claimed here as part of the construction of Bwa identity are explored from the very first words. Next, it is shown that the ethnicization manifested in this performance has long-standing political and scientific foundations. Finally, this paradoxical injunction addressed to Malian Bwa to be part of the nation while focusing on their own identity is discussed in a context where identity claims are reinforced by the importance taken by social networks on the internet.

**Keywords:** orality, French West Africa, Bani-Volta War (1915–1916), Bwa revolt/Bobo revolt, anti-colonialism, ethnicization, Facebook.

## Introduction

For nine months, at the height of the First World War, the populations of the region between the bend of the Muhun River (formerly, the Black Volta) and the Bani River rose up against the French colonial army. Although this caused lasting difficulties for the French military, it is rarely mentioned in colonial history (Şaul 59–60). However, it played a very important role in the local populations’ history. Thus, the stories of ‘the time of the revolt’ have been passed down through generations, and in the 1990s one could still hear elders recounting the exploits of their fathers, and even their own remembrances.

In May 2001, managers and intellectuals from the region of the Bani River founded a cultural association, Niimi-Présence Bwa, with the aim of defending the Bwa minority in Mali.<sup>1</sup> The association organized a festival in the city of San (Mali) in December 2001 to prepare the

---

<sup>1</sup> The Bwa (or Bwaba or Bwawa depending on the dialect) are called “Bobos Oulés” in ancient texts and military reports. “Bobo” is an exonym of Mandingo origin used by the colonial administration.

centenary of this event (commemoration which would finally take place ad minima, due to the security crisis in the region in 2016). The recital studied in this article, transcribed from a recorded oral performance (now available online) (Petit Tony), was produced during this festival. The performance was repeated at the Palais de la Culture in Bamako in January 2002. Based on a composition by Bertin Dembélé and griot Pakouéné François Goïta, who also plays the role of narrator, the musical part is performed by Super Zamaza of Konsankuy, a group of well-known griots in the region. Goïta (1947–2013) was a former teacher who was very involved in the preservation of local traditions.

The founding members of Niimi intend to work so that the Bwa (singular Bo), a people who speak Boomu, a Gur language closer to the Burkina Faso population, are not forgotten within the Republic of Mali. Niimi literally means part/exists and can be understood as ‘the one who is part of it; the one who counts’.

Thus, the name of the association is summoned in the refrain sung at the beginning of the recital: “*Wa dio we de a wa nii mi le?*” (Do we really count?) (Leguy, “‘Est-ce que vraiment nous comptons?’: Une question d’actualité”). The question is posed by the artists to their contemporaries, urging them to integrate, to ‘be part of’ the Republic of Mali.

The study of the songs and text of the recital invites one to question the part of identity reconstruction expressed in this commemoration of the revolt. In light of the historical studies that have been conducted on this event (Şaul and Royer; Coulibaly), it is possible to state that the purpose of the interpreters is not only to make known the historical facts that marked a region on the occasion of their centenary. A rewriting of history at the service of an identity construction can be read in the background of the performance, as in the motivations of the members of the Niimi association. In this article I argue that the vision of the revolt’s history such as it is proposed in this performance has the effect of inventing boundaries, even though it is a call to integrate into a larger whole. It highlights what can be understood as a paradoxical injunction. Indeed, the public is called to ‘be part of’ a country, while claiming as specific to the Bwa of Mali an event that belongs to the history of a whole region not only populated by the Bwa, and that goes far beyond the borders of what Mali is today. In this performance one thus witnesses an ethnicization that is built on a rewriting of history, an ethnicization that is also remarkable in the comments exchanged on the commemoration of the revolt on social networks. The consultation of the posts related to this event on the internet confirms this hypothesis.

The performance, consisting of a 31-minute musical introduction and the recital itself, which lasts just over 24 minutes, places in parallel the struggle of the elders against the colonizer — who imposed forced labour in inhumane conditions on the peasants—and the current struggles of their descendants to no longer be the ‘left behind’ by a state that does not care about them. For lack of space, I will only study a few extracts from the recital to question the part of identity reconstruction conveyed by the performance, and the way the present-day Malian Bwa are re-appropriating this episode of their history in order to claim their place in a country where they feel marginalized.

This article is organized in three points. First, I study the context of this anti-colonial war and the way in which it is claimed here as part of the construction of the Bwa identity. Second, I show that the ethnicization manifested in this performance has ancient political and scientific foundations. Finally, I discuss the paradoxical injunction addressed to the Malian Bwa to be part of the nation while focusing on one’s own identity, in a context where identity claims are reinforced by the importance taken by social networks on the internet.

## ***Munuti*, a shadowy anti-colonial war**

The recital, entitled *Munuti* in Boomu, from the Bambara word *múrutu* (to rebel) (Vydrin et al.), begins with an introduction, alternating between the chorus' sung refrain and the soloist's declaimed verses. Only the songs are partly sung in Boomu, the spoken parts being in French.<sup>2</sup> In this first part of the performance, there is no mention of history, except for allusions to the "Bo of yesterday" and the formula in the declamation of the soloist: "*a tan den be yi bo*" (is the old word true?). The 'old word' (*tan den*), an expression often translated as 'tradition', can also be understood here as 'the story from the past', the story of our history.

Another interesting expression can be noted: "*Nii-mi lo wa wuro bore*" (Nii-mi says let's speak Boomu). Bore, or Boomu, designates the Bwa language, but also more broadly the ways of being Bo, including ways of speaking. To know how to speak Boomu is also to be frank, to tell the truth, insofar as 'bo' also means 'to be true'. One could as well translate "Niimi says let's speak our language" as "Niimi says let's be frank, truthful".

The use of the balafon and the different musical rhythms—in particular the cheerful rhythm inciting bravery called *tindoro* on which the performance ends—contribute to give a typically Bwa coloration to the performance. This first part of the song is therefore a call to the people of today, an invitation to the Bwa—sedentary peasants, urbanized employees, or young graduates—to become more involved in life in Mali, to work to regain the pride of yesterday. After this musical introduction, the recital begins with these words (spoken in French to the background of the balafon):

*Mesdames, Mesdemoiselles et Messieurs, bonsoir*

*Le groupe Zamaza de Konsankuy voudrait vivre avec vous une page de l'histoire glorieuse des Bwa.*

*Ladies and Gentlemen, good evening*

*The group Zamaza of Konsankuy would like to live with you a page of the glorious history of the Bwa.*

What is commonly referred to as the revolt is indeed a great moment in the history of this region of West Africa. The narrative takes place within a more global anti-colonial resistance, which gave rise to a conflict presented as a real war, the Bani-Volta War (Şaul and Royer; Coulibaly). The narrator himself points that the term 'revolt' was used disdainfully by white people. This designation is also discussed by scholars, notably by Patrick Royer, who compares this event to other anti-colonial struggles:

African resistance movements have been the subject of typologies, all very similar to each other, which, like any classification exercise, shed useful light, but ignore or transform movements that do not fit the proposed models, leading to very fragile conclusions, such as the absence of a large-scale anti-colonial movement in West Africa. The 'Volta revolt', when mentioned, falls into the category of peasant uprisings, as opposed to mass movements (such as the Maji-Maji in Tanganyika from 1905 to 1907, the Kongo-Wara war in Central Africa from 1927 to 1932, or the Mau-Mau insurrection in Kenya from 1952 to 1956). The Volta War was, however, comparable to these movements in terms of the number of combatants and, unfortunately, victims. The question is not to decide which was the most deadly anti-colonial war, but to question the systematic use of terms such as 'rebellion' and 'revolt' by linking them to the military balance of power, a perspective that is not that of the local populations. (Royer 39, my translation)

According to Mahir Şaul and Patrick Royer (24), "[i]n terms of scale only [...], the Volta-Bani War was by far more massive than any of these other movements".

They rightly point out that researchers have shown little interest in this event, which put French troops in difficulty for several months. However, as they show in their book, it was a large-

---

<sup>2</sup> Transcription and translation by Zufo Alexis Dembélé, reviewed by Pierre Diarra and Cécile Leguy. Excerpts from the performance were presented in French (Leguy, "'Est-ce que vraiment'").

scale conflict, “a seismic event in West African colonial history” (Şaul and Royer 23), which involved an uninterrupted territory of nearly 80,000 km<sup>2</sup> (Şaul 59).

Historians explain this lack of interest in the event by political circumstances. On the one hand, the French authorities had no interest in revealing everything that had happened in West Africa during the First World War.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, the nations that became independent, for other reasons, did not seek to highlight this episode of their history.

One reason the Volta-Bani War is so little known in the scholarly literature is the attitudes of successive governments that ruled over these territories. [...] This was the time of strong Allied propaganda against Germany. The German territories in Africa were attacked and taken over by joint British and French forces, with the loud justification of the South West Africa and Tanganyika insurrections being given as evidence. Any news about trouble in their own territories would expose both Britain and France to the charge of self-righteous hypocrisy. France especially had good reason to fear exposure. The violence in the suppressions of the Volta-Bani opposition probably surpassed German actions in either of the above-mentioned conflicts.

[...]

Both in Mali and Upper Volta (the former Burkina Faso), the Volta-Bani anticolonial war concerned areas that were marginal in terms of the symbols mobilized to forge a national identity: ancient Mali and the heritage of the Bambara of the middle course of the Niger, in the first case, and the Mose kingdoms, in the second. In fact, in both countries large numbers of people who identified strongly with this national identity came from places that participated on the side of the French in the repression of 1916. (Şaul and Royer 24–5)

Indeed, the facts as reported in the narratives highlight a rather delicate situation, pitting not only the populations against the colonial soldiers (many of whom were ‘*tirailleurs sénégalais*’, indigenous soldiers; see Echenberg), but also the local populations against each other. During the First World War, the French colonizer, whose presence was already contested in this region, came to take the most valiant among the villagers to make them soldiers. The others, including women and children, were asked to continue forced labour under the command of colonial auxiliaries from populations that had agreed to collaborate with the French. In contrast, the peoples of the region between Bani and Muhun were known for their insubordination, having previously resisted conquest and Islamization. They had never considered themselves to be subjugated, claiming not only their cherished freedom, but also certain occult powers (Royer 42). The following extracts show how the event is narrated in the recital:

It all began on 23 November 1915 in Bona, a small village in present-day Burkina Faso.<sup>4</sup> That morning, as usual, the Frenchman, the colonizer, had asked the people of Bwatun [the Bwa country] to rebuild the Bobo-Dioulasso-San road [...]. Among the women required to fetch water from two kilometers away was a certain Téné Coulibaly from Bona. Téné was pregnant and had reached term. The work continued until nightfall. At around 3pm, Téné Coulibaly felt contractions and went to find the guard Alamisso Diarra who was in charge of monitoring the workers. She said to him: “Please, give me permission to go back to the village to be assisted by an old traditional birth attendant”. But Téné Coulibaly’s response was to be a sharp blow with a riding crop, sending her back to work. Around 4pm, Téné Coulibaly gave birth to her first child, a beautiful boy, in full view of everyone. Téné Coulibaly then took her baby, still covered in blood, in her arms and addressed the Bwa, saying:

Valiant men of Bwatun  
Whether I, Téné Coulibaly, survive or not  
Whether my child here survives or not  
I name him Hianbe!

---

<sup>3</sup> One can read in the military reports relating to this episode of the violence of the repression, in particular towards women and children massacred without restraint (Vennes, “Understanding Colonial Violence: Military Culture, Colonial Context, and the Civilizing Mission in the Volta-Bani War (1915–16)”).

<sup>4</sup> The village of Bona, department of Safané, province of Mouhoun, in present-day Burkina Faso.

Hianbe means war chief. The Bwa present on the site understood Téné Coulibaly's message. They rushed at Alamisso Diarra and laid him on the ground, bathed in his blood. A delegation of five people was immediately formed to report to the village chief of Bona, [...] he said this:

Bravo my children, you are worthy of us.

I tell you that your mission has just begun.

Go back to the site.

Cut off the ears of this renegade.

Cut off his limbs.

Strip him of his clothes.

Form two groups and go through all the villages of the Tietun (a region of the Bwa country).

When you arrive in each village, blow the horns and when the people are gathered say to them this: "From today, we Bwa have defeated the White authority. From today, the Whites will no longer command us. So let us unite and defend the land of our ancestors." This war of liberation, disdainfully named by the white man as "the Bwa revolt" [...], started by the workers of the construction site alone on 23 November 1915, had 30,000 combatants on November 26th. On November 29th there were 50,000 fighters and by mid-December there were 92,000 from all over Bwatun. (my translation)

### ***Munuti beni* (the Great Revolt) and the Bwa's claim to identity: A long-time ethnicization**

Later in the performance, the narrator invites the president of the Niimi association—a woman at this time—to identify with the heroine whose name has been retained in oral tradition, the one who was forced to give birth on the road.<sup>5</sup> In this recital, she is presented as the initiator of the revolt by naming her baby *Hianbe* (arrows/chief, or chief of the arrows), a name usually given to a child born during a war. As in other African languages, it is common in Boomu to give names to children who carry messages addressed to a third person or to the community (for a more detailed discussion on this see Leguy, "What Do 'Message-Names' Say? The Management of Kinship and the Act of Naming among the Bwa [Mali]"). However, this trigger, dated 23 November 1915 by anthropologist Jean Capron, is presented as such by the French military officers themselves (100). The narrator here attributes to her a founding speech act: she merely names her new-born child, but this name is a call to war. In the stories of the Bani-Volta War, there are two frequently repeated narrative motifs featuring women at the origin of the conflict. In one, a young woman who has just given birth is forced to return to work at the risk of her child. In the other, as in this recital, a pregnant woman is forced to work until she gives birth to her child on the spot, in full view of everyone.

What above we called 'a narrative self-understanding of the movement' are two stories about the war's beginnings that repeated, with slight variations, in many sources. These stories are laced with the emblematic themes of colonialism, forced labor, road construction, cruel guards, women at work, and threats to women's fertility and sexuality. Although only one of these stories finds confirmation in a record, we presume that they take their origin in actual incidents. (Şaul and Royer 132–3)

The live dismemberment of the guard and dispersal of his limbs in order to invite neighbouring villages to join the battle is also a frequent motif in war stories (Şaul and Royer 134). Nazi Boni's novel also states:

The wisdom of the Bwamu recommends that the house should be swept before its surroundings. The purge began with the enemies within, the "black traitors and mercenaries". The inhabitants of Fatianna butchered alive the guard Alanenson, who was known for his cruelty: the first piacular offering to the "Sacred Land of the Ancestors, profaned by the godless". (222–3, my translation)

---

<sup>5</sup> Agnès Dembélé, president of Niimi from 2001 to 2004, was in charge of the Ministry for the Promotion of Women, Children, and the Family from 2002 to 2005, under President Alpha Oumar Konaré.

This conflict pitted the population not only against the French military, but also against their local auxiliaries, whose abuses they suffered. Those who had put themselves at the service of the colonizer—in this region mostly Fulani and Manding who are generally Muslims—looked like those who had sought to impose their power over the region in previous centuries, and against whom the Bwa people had always fought.

At the beginning of the 21st century, the Bwa living in Mali still consider themselves marginalized in a country where Manding and Fulani individuals hold the majority positions of power. Thus, this narrative highlighting the deeds of the Bwa ancestors during this anti-colonial war is an invitation to the contemporaries to become part of the national construction and to take their future into their own hands.

In Burkina Faso, the revolt also concerns people who are far from power, albeit in a different way. Céleste Coulibaly recalls that Boni, the famous Bwa writer and first Burkinabe to publish a literary work (Millogo), was an opponent of Maurice Yaméogo, the first president of independent Upper Volta (Coulibaly 14). Boni was a deputy in the French National Assembly for ten years from 1948 to 1958 and in the Territorial Assembly of Upper Volta from 1947 to 1959 (of which he was president from 1958 to 1959). His word mattered. Yaméogo was not going to emphasize the glorious past of the people who supported his rival, whom he forced into exile and whose property he confiscated in 1960.<sup>6</sup> Boni's famous novel, *Crépuscule des temps anciens* (1962), ends in the already troubled period that heralds this war, which was also a way for him to show the strength of resistance of his people.

The situation is somewhat different today in Burkina Faso, where the Bwa do not feel as devalued by the state. The revolt has a strong historical meaning, since as a result the French decided to divide the colony of Haut-Sénégal-Niger into sectors which were easier to control, thus creating the colony of Upper Volta on 1 March 1919. The centennial commemoration was mentioned at the opening of the National Assembly in September 2016. Gaston Gnimien, a Burkinabe historian, had this to say at the opening:

Under the impetus of its president Salifou Diallo, the National Assembly held its first parliamentary session under the sign of the 100 years of what colonial literature has confined to the name “Bwa revolt of 1915–1916” but which, in reality, was an insurrectional process that concerned almost all the peoples located between the Bani River (North Ivory Coast – Mali) and the Black Volta, today's Muhun. This initiative of the National Representation is worthy of interest in more than one respect. It brings to light a part of national history that colonization deliberately kept under wraps because not only was the terrible repression of the revolt the antithesis of the civilizing mission that colonial France had set itself, but also because its scale cast doubt on France's omnipotence.

The initiative to commemorate the centenary of the first popular uprising in Burkina Faso shows the contribution of the peoples of the West to the building of the nation. It is indeed well known, as the rest of this paper will show, that it was following this revolt that the decision was taken to divide up the immense colony of Sénégal-Niger in order to bring the colonial administration closer to the territories under its control, thus creating the Colony of Upper Volta, now Burkina Faso. [...] (Gnimien, my translation)

On both sides of the border, however, there is what can be called an ethnicization of the revolt, referred to as the “Bwa revolt”, or Bobo revolt, which is made clear in the performance studied. In reality, the war was not fought only by the Bwa; other populations took part in it. Put differently, all the populations of this region between the Bani and the Muhun rivers, to the Dogon and Samo territories in the north, participated in the revolt. Alliances between villages go beyond ethnic or religious distinctions, as Royer says:

The colonial vision of the Bani-Volta region as inhabited by autonomous village societies linked only by ethnicity seemed to exclude the possibility of a large-scale movement like that of 1915–

---

<sup>6</sup> Boni went into exile in Bamako and then in Dakar. He returned to Upper Volta in 1966, after the fall of the Yaméogo regime following a popular movement (Millogo 12).

1916. By absorbing, eliminating, or neglecting the most important regional political actors, the French military, and the civilians who succeeded them, constructed an image of ‘anarchic’ societies, devoid of centralized political organization, which certainly posed problems of administration, but which could not present a military threat. The administrators, unable to move beyond an ethnic or village framework, were not able to suspect underlying structures that would make inter-village coordination possible. To the great surprise of the Governor General, ethnic and linguistic boundaries did not constitute an obstacle to the expansion of the anti-colonial movement. (43–4, my translation)

The revolt began in the Marka-Dafing country in November 1915. As early as 17 November, the people of Bona—a Marka village—refused to donate riflemen, rallying other villages to their cause the next day (Şaul and Royer 127–40). On 19 November, the village of Bona resisted the intervention of the commandant who was forced to retreat: this was the official start of the revolt. The insurrection quickly spread throughout the Muhun region, which was largely populated by Bwa, but also by Marka-Dafing, mostly Muslims. In the Malian region of Bwatun, it was only at the beginning of 1916 that villages rallied to the cause, in particular Mandiakuy and Tiotio (Capron 101). The important event for the anti-colonial insurrection in this region is the destruction of the military camp at Tominian on 4 March 1916 (105). According to Şaul and Royer:

A notable feature of the war around San and the neighboring areas of the two other cercles [Koutiala and Bandiagara] is that it flared up at a late date. Anticolonial activities reached their height in this cercle in April 1916, when the Molard column was immobilized in Dedougou for lack of ammunition, and continued on a high note until June, when refugees from the repression in Dedougou came to join them. The vigor of the movement forced the government to create a second column in San. (236)

Moreover, not all the Bwa villages revolted, and the dissensions between the communities in revolt and those that submitted to the colonist led to the destruction of many villages considered to be traitors: this was the case for Bénéna, for example. The narrator does not mention that the number of villages that sided with the revolt was even lower than those that sided with the French military: “It is proven to the French administration that the Bobo, Marka, and Minyanka country of San only revolted under pressure from the Dedougou rebels.<sup>7</sup> 308 villages were won over by the revolt against 481 that remained loyal, these populations brought 7,000 porters and 366,000 kg of millet” (Diarra 436). Thus, Royer blames the ‘ethnic and religious’ prism through which scholars view African realities for the misconception of what was presented as a population movement mixing people of different origins and languages:

The 1915–1916 war became known as the ‘Bwa revolt’ (or Bobo, as they were also called) because the first notable descriptions and analyses of this war are part of works about the Bwa. However, if Bwa communities suffered particularly from this war, it was not as Bwa. The movement was not initiated by Bwa, and Bwa communities sided with the colonial forces. Membership of the movement was not linked to any ethnic affiliation [...] but reflected membership of groups and networks formed by ties of kinship, residence, or alliance between villages or neighborhoods of villages. It was not uncommon to oppose a neighboring village speaking the same language and to ally oneself, often through religious cults, with distant villages speaking a foreign language. Lineages, neighborhoods, military and economic centers, were the main social operators; not ethnic identity. (44, my translation)

However, in ordinary discourse, as in this recital, the revolt is claimed to be a ‘Bwa revolt’, even though it is known on the one hand that Marka, Dogon, Samo, and other people joined the insurgents, and on the other hand that not all Bwa villages joined the anti-colonial struggle. This was already the case when Boni’s book was published and with works published by scholars afterwards, in particular Capron’s monograph, even though he shows that the Marka

---

<sup>7</sup> “Bobo” is an exonym of Manding origin used by the colonial administration to designate the Bwa.



populations of the department of Safané were at the origin of the insurrection (99–101).<sup>8</sup> Capron himself presents the revolt as the basis of a new identity for the village communities of Bwatun: “The 1915 revolt represents the culmination of a political awareness, the awakening of a people for whom the re-conquest of independence represents the only chance to be themselves again, to exist as a people. Taking up arms, the village communities erased, in one fell swoop, several decades of foreign domination; one by one, they rebuilt the Bwa people (101, my translation)”. Thus, as Şaul points out (60), this ethnicization is reinforced by the publication of Boni’s novel, and then Capron’s monograph, which remained the two major references dealing with the event, until the publication of Şaul and Royer’s book. There is also a bias emanating from the colonial discourse: as Vennes shows (*Civiliser et discipliner: la mission civilisatrice et la culture militaire coloniale lors de la guerre du Bani-Volta (1885–1919)*, 103–7), in the classification of populations that was made according to their supposed degree of civilization, Bwa were considered inferior to the Markas and other populations of Manding origin. The wearing of woven clothing, the existence of a hierarchical order, and conversion to Islam were important civilizational traits for the colonizer (Şaul and Royer 77). In the 1910 Military Manual studied by Vennes (“L’officier, la colonie et l’indigène: conceptions du maintien de l’ordre à travers le Manuel tactique du groupe de l’AOF (1910)”), the Bwa are mentioned among the lowest ranking populations: “very primitive, bellicose, with only rudimentary organization”, they would not make good ‘tirailleurs’ (80). Used to infighting, they seem to be unmanageable. This implies that they are not recognized for their strategic skills and that they are thought to be incapable of organizing themselves to face the French army, which will be all the more surprised by the way in which the villagers of this region will resist it. French forces were amazed by what is sometimes considered to be a suicidal attitude on the part of the Bwa people, so disproportionate were the means brought into play. Their entry into the war forced the French military to reinforce itself and the fighting was particularly violent.

The Bwa themselves did not enter into combat before the episode recounted in this performance, when a woman who was about to give birth was forced to continue working under the whip of a guard. This incident is noted as having taken place on 23 November between Poundou and Koanko, on the Bobo-Dioulasso road construction site, in the Commandant Edgard Maguet’s account of it, quoted by Capron (100). This episode would not necessarily have any connection with the revolt initiated by the Marka, but it would be the triggering element because of the sending of the guard’s severed limbs for the insurrection to spread throughout the region, even to San.

In the recital, what happened in Bona and the reaction of Téné, the woman forced to give birth at the worksite, are assimilated. By making this amalgam, the narrator propels this woman, who names her child ‘chief of the arrows’ in Boomu, as the initiator of the revolt. He thus accentuates the attribution of the revolt to the Bwa even more. Leaving in the shade all the action carried out by the Marka of Bona, the performance reinforces de facto the identity aspect of the event, as it is presented at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

In the performance, the narrator pays tribute to various heroes of this war. He begins by mentioning El Hadj Adama Dembélé, the instigator of the revolt in the San region, who joined the movement in March 1916 and dragged the region into the fight (Şaul and Royer 243–4). The one who is praised first is a Dafing (Marka) hero, a cleric of Kula also called Kula Ladji.

He had twice been a pilgrim to Mecca, and it is said that on his return from his last pilgrimage there in 1914, he had initiated contacts with influential Marka and Bwa leaders of his own region in preparation for a revolt against the French. On 11th March 1916, Batieri of Sanaba (who was not a Muslim himself) recognized Dembélé as the leader of the war in the San region. Dembélé carefully situated himself within the moral hierarchy of the movement. He first sent the traditional

---

<sup>8</sup> This classic monograph is presented as a contribution to the ethnology of the Bwa and is the first large-scale ethnographic work conducted in this region.

sheep and chicken to Batieri, who accepted the presents and in return encouraged Dembélé's emissaries to wear the *dafu*, saying it would help to fight the French and would deflect French bullets. (Şaul and Royer 243)

The *dafu*—which in Bambara refers to a cord woven from the fibres of the hibiscus *sabdariffa* (da in Manding languages)—was originally a Dafing insignia relating to an age class, consisting of two strings, one worn around the head, the other hung around the neck (Royer 47). This insignia had become a rallying ornament for insurgents (Şaul and Royer 131). Thus, the so-called Bwa revolt was initiated in the San region by a Muslim cleric, who included the insurgent villages of the region in the larger network of those engaged in the Bani-Volta War under the impetus of the Marka-Dafing inhabitants of Bona, who imposed their cultic practices as a rallying insignia on all anti-colonial people.

The narrator does not mention the heroes who have distinguished themselves in the bend of the Muhun region, not even Yisu Kote from the village of Bona who is considered by historians to be the inspirer of the movement, called by the French the 'great fetishist' (Royer 47–9). The heroes mentioned in the performance are more specifically heroes from the Bani region (i.e., on the present-day Malian side): Zuku Koné from Bénéna, Bouakari Dakouo from Mandiakuy, Papa Dembélé from Tiotio, and Bazanni Thèra from Sankuy. Each of these heroes is the subject of a panegyric.

Thus, the attribution of the revolt to the Bwa, already present in the military reports of the time, has been reinforced both by literature—due to the success of Boni's novel—and by research, notably that of Capron. In the performance, the narrator only accentuates this ethnicization by emphasizing the actions of Boomu-speaking heroes and heroines. But one can see from the beginning that the narrator further narrows the focus by establishing a boundary that did not make sense at the time of the Bani-Volta War. In fact, he specifically addresses the Malians Bwa, and he presents their country as 'the' country of the revolt, further accentuating the identity perspective of the narrative by making it the account of a history specific to the Bwa of Mali.

### **Participating and setting boundaries: A paradoxical injunction**

There is thus a kind of paradoxical injunction in this performance. While claiming a place in contemporary Mali, an invitation to participate in a common history, it does so by presenting as specifically Bwa an episode of history that marked a whole region, retaining more precisely the names of the Bwa and the villages of the Malian Bwa country concerned. The contemporary Malian situation, in which the inhabitants of this region feel marginalized, undoubtedly reinforces this attribution of the revolt to the Bwa.

Further in the recital one can see how the narrator focuses the action on the Malian region of Bwa country alone, as if the insurrection ultimately concerned only this region, between the Bani River and the current border with Burkina Faso. Not only is the revolt attributed primarily to the Bwa alone, but more precisely to the Bwa on the Malian side of the present border:

The first clash between Bwa fighters and French troops took place on December 27th, 1915, at Bénéna. That day, the small military post guarded by about thirty men was stormed and completely taken. After Bénéna, the next shock took place on January 9th, 1916 at Sabara near Mandiakuy. Once again, our Bwa fighters routed the French troops.

Then came the great battle of March 4th, 1916, known as the 'Battle of Tominian'. On that day, in Tominian, the battalion of 100 men parked on what we call today the hill of the Ancients Combatants was attacked by thousands of Bwa fighters. That day, the representative of the white power, the evil and reckless canton chief, was caught and shot with head-butchers. That day, the French lieutenant who commanded the French troops was taken and shot. In Tominian, you will still find today this place that we call the place of remembrance, a testimony to the bravery of our fighters. [applause] It was then that the Bwa fighters decided to march on San. Because at that time, a certain André Bonzot, administrator of the indigenous colonies, was living in San. It was

necessary to take this administrator to completely defeat the white authority. The meeting took place on May 1st, 1916 in nearby Sienso.

The clash was brutal, deadly, relentless. In spite of the intervention of the 80 mm gun, our fighters still routed the French.

The appointment was made for July 14th, this time on the plain of Ténéni. On the evening of the 13th, they came, they came by thousands, from all over the Bwatun. [...] Minyanka, led by Zié Sogoba of Karangasso, joined our fighters that day. Dogons, led by Tomo Kodjo, joined our fighters. [applause] Then, warned at night by who doesn't know who, Mr. André Bonzot sent the Governor General a message that read:

'Mr. Governor General,

The situation is critical. The post of San is in danger. The Bobo will soon attack. They are around the post by thousands and thousands. Send reinforcements and more reinforcements. It must be recognized that of all the revolts that we have had to live through in the field, the revolt of the Bwa, of the Bobo, is the most tenacious. It has been going on for nine months, causing many victims among our men. The Bwa fighters are of unspeakable courage. They would rather kill themselves or each other than surrender. Send reinforcements.'

Reinforcements arrived from all the garrisons of the territory. So, on that day, July 15th, 16th, 17th, and 18th, the French soldiers in Koro used for the first time, in addition to assault rifles and the 80 mm gun, machine guns and offensive grenades.

'We were getting a shower of bullets everywhere', an old survivor of this barbaric slaughter would later say.

[*yoo-lenu*: Music of sadness, tune for funeral oration]

The narrator's words encourage the public to identify with the insurgents. On several occasions, he uses the possessive pronoun to designate the insurgents: 'our fighters'; 'our Bwa fighters'. In a general movement, he rallies all the Bwa in the same fight, specifying that "they came by thousands, from all over the Bwatun". If he does not forget to mention two non-Bwa heroes from the Bani region, Tomo Kodjo the Dogon and Zié Sogoba from Karangasso the Minyanka, the presence of the neighbouring populations remains allusive. In the appeal for help that he imagines sent by the administrator of San, he insists on the bravery of the Bwa fighters. He then alludes to the well-known saying from Boni's novel: "Rather Humu (death) than Wobamu (slavery)!" (233) Reports written by both administrators and the military often note, not without surprise, that people would rather die than submit.

As Fredrik Barth has well demonstrated, ethnic identities do not exist "as such", but are constructed in interaction, according to differences or oppositions that make sense and constitute boundaries, even if this does not involve cultural or linguistic differences. Andreas Wimmer (26), focusing on boundary making processes, shows that reality presents itself more as a continuum of possibilities between the two extremes represented by the essentialist and constructivist conceptions. According to the typology of "modes and means of boundary making" that he proposes (79–112), there are two kinds of boundary shifting strategies: either they are expansion strategies that make the boundary more inclusive, or they are contraction strategies, of isolationism, that make it more exclusive. It is this second way of making boundaries that is observed here, insofar as one is witnessing an identity claim that excludes, by omission, a large part of the protagonists of history to make it an event specific to the particular heritage of a small, marginalized population that thus claims pride in having a past that belongs to it alone.

The paradoxical injunction observed in this case, based on a performance composed for a cultural event that took place in 2001, at a time when it seemed important to assert one's own cultural identity by forming Niimi-Présence Bwa-type associations, seems to reveal the more general dialectical movement of tension between a certain universalizing globalization and the expression of local particularisms. Analysing this paradox at a more general level, Arif Dirlik,

evoking not without humour “some devilish design to mock the postcolonial argument” (220), made the following observation:

Cultural nationalism, ethnicism, indigenism have emerged as markers of cultural politics globally; over the last decade ethnicity has moved to the center of politics, overshadowing earlier concerns with class and gender. Claims to cultural authenticity, moreover, have been accompanied by efforts to discover or restore authentic pasts as foundations for contemporary identity; most urgently among those who have suffered ‘the sentence of history’. The most basic problem presented by this paradoxical situation is the disjuncture between cultural criticism and cultural politics. Even as cultural criticism renders the past into a plaything at the hands of the present, the burden of the past haunts contemporary politics in a reassertion of cultural identities. (221)

The political situation, as experienced by the population of this remote and somewhat marginalized region of Mali, effectively leads them to look for a source of pride in their identity in a glorious past that sets them apart. For Wimmer, the ways of ‘making boundaries’ depend on the structuring of three dimensions of social space: the institutions, the individuals’ positions in social space, and, finally, the networks to which they belong (146). While stories of the revolt circulated orally in the villages, the approach of the centenary, in a complex political context, prompted intellectuals from the region to commemorate the event. It is well known that the internet has played a role in the expression of an identity construction independent of states (see Galtier). If the colonial and independence periods contributed to an ethnicization of the populations, this work of constructing one’s own ethnic identity is accentuated by the use of certain social networks, following the creation of cultural pages that are very popular.<sup>9</sup>

By creating specific Facebook groups, Bwa people referred to the revolt on the one hand to ask for a commemoration for the centenary in 2016, and on the other hand to call for a new revolt. If one looks more closely at the posts relating to the commemoration of the event, one can see an appeal to ethnic identity. Based on the image of bravery, honour, and insubordination transmitted by the memory of the revolt, it is asking for more equal treatment for the Bwa in Mali. A call for rebellion following the Tuaregs, who have succeeded in obtaining quotas in the administration, can be read too. In the thread of discussions on these Facebook pages created in the early 2010s, in a period of high political tension due to the conjunction operated between the Tuareg independence claims and the expansion of jihadist movements that are gaining popularity, the members express their desire not to be forgotten as Bwa. More specifically, following the signing in May and June 2015 of the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali (known as the ‘Algiers Agreement’), after negotiations that took place in Algiers between the Republic of Mali and the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA), which brings together various Tuareg movements, there was an expression of concern about what is denounced as ‘a premium for terror’. The Malian state is criticized for giving in to arms, while remaining deaf to the demands of other peaceful minority communities. In order to express their bitterness and to call for a true ‘inclusive dialogue’ that would give a fair place to each Malian, whatever their origin, the past is summoned: “In 1916, we fought the colonizer bravely and for well-known reasons. We feel that we are reliving the events that led the Bo community to rise up against the colonizer. Will we be forced to rise up a hundred years later to have our dignity restored?” (Bwatun sur Facebook page, posted on 19 July 2015, minutes of the Bwa-Niimi meeting of 14 July 2015, my translation).

---

<sup>9</sup> Facebook groups: Bwatun sur Facebook (Mali): created on 9 August 2011, 32,351 members as of 5 August 2023 (10 moderators); Bwaba et amis (Burkina Faso): created on 26 October 2011, 26,239 members as of 5 August 2023 (6 moderators); Le Tominianais (Mali): created on 16 April 2012, 11,210 members as of 5 August 2023 (8 moderators); Comémoration de la Révolte des Bwa de 1916-2016 “100 ans” (Burkina Faso): created on 22 May 2017, 940 followers as of 5 August 2023; Bwaba: ma région, mon village, ma culture (Burkina Faso): created on 13 May 2019, 2 394 members as of 5 August 2023 (1 moderator); identitebwaba.org (Burkina Faso): created on 22 March 2015, approximately 4000 followers as of 5 August 2023.

Thus, as the centenary approached, in this politically tense period when some seem to be heard more than others, the Bwa who were active on the networks were inviting people to take up the path of revolt. For some, it was a question of making known the past that is too often ignored. But for others, it was time to take up arms again, which led to lively debates in the midst of various publications highlighting cultural facts (the preparation of millet beer or the release of masks, for example), performances by young artists (Ben Zabo, for example, who calls himself “the warrior of the Bwatun”), linguistic questions (how do you call this fruit or this plant in your village?), or local announcements (sale of traditional fabrics, but also of cement or services).

In this case, as in other contexts, the use of social networks on the internet seems to accentuate the identity movement. The phenomenon of ethnicization already noted in the narratives concerning the historical event is reinforced in the messages posted more specifically on the Facebook pages run by nationals of the Bwa region, with sometimes violent identity claims.

However, the episode went down in history as the ‘Bwa revolt’, as the Bwa people had several war heroes in its ranks and the area inhabited by the Bwa was effectively in the middle of the region opposed to the colonists. The Bwa country suffered a lot of destruction (villages destroyed by cannon, granaries burnt down, etc.) and produced many victims (more than 30,000 deaths) (Şaul and Royer 4–5).

These elements, transmitted through oral accounts in the families and then staged and set to music with the purpose of commemorating the centenary in the performance studied, contribute to the claim of a specific identity, of a particular history, by a people known for their capacity to integrate external elements (Diarra), which in fact concerns a region described by Şaul and Royer as an “ethnic puzzle” (14–7). The recital ends with a call to preserve one’s own culture, which sounds like a political claim to identity.

Then,

Niimi Présence-Bwa,

Together, let us acknowledge our entity.

It is a hard but noble fight.

The fight can only be done if we recognize ourselves Bo and if we cultivate our [...]

Let’s say, as if you allow it, that if we cultivate our culture.

[...]

I say to you, yes, people of Bwatun, let us be proud of our culture.

Because people without culture are destined to disappear, phagocyted by others who have known how to value and perpetuate theirs.

In this paradoxical injunction to be part of the Malian nation while at the same time reinventing their own communitarian and ethnicist history, one sees the expression of a re-invented and narrativized identity. The Bwa of Mali, by claiming the 1915–16 revolt as their own particular history, are not only asserting a particular identity that sets them apart from other Malians who do not share the same heritage, but are also separating themselves from the other populations of the region—and even from the Bwa populations of Burkina Faso whose language they share—who are heirs to the same past, but are located outside the borders of present-day Mali. The situation highlighted by this performance, composed to commemorate a glorious past, is part of an identity claim that goes beyond mere cultural expression. But as Dirlik points out, “Cultural identity [...] is not a matter of ‘identity politics’ but a condition of survival, and its implications may be grasped only by reference to structures of power” (227). For a dominated population, which struggles to find its place within the Malian nation, commemorating the centenary of the revolt against the French colonizer is not merely a duty of memory towards the glorious ancestors.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have shown how the identity claims of a minority population can be expressed through a certain rewriting of history, by studying the text of a recital performed in 2001. In this recital, created within the framework of a cultural association to prepare for the centenary of the anti-colonial war that caused unrest in a fairly large area of French West Africa in 1915–1916, now divided between Burkina Faso and Mali, the commemoration is part of a double identity claim. This can be described as an ethnicization, in the sense that the revolt is almost exclusively attributed to the Bwa people, their fellow fighters Marka-Dafing, Samo, or Dogon being barely mentioned. However, I have shown that it was not as Bwa that the insurgents fought, but as inhabitants of a region that refused to submit too easily to outside power, especially when that power was cruel and violent. On the other hand, this recital also shows a nationalization of the event, which participates in the construction of a border that acknowledges the separation of the region between Burkina Faso and Mali, even though this border is artificial and has long been contested. It cuts through the heart of a territory, thereby isolating the Bwa populations who live on the Malian border within a country of which they are marginalized, speaking a Gur language and sharing many cultural traits with the neighbouring Burkinabe populations. Thus, this recital paradoxically invites the Bwa to integrate into the Malian nation while insisting on a historical heritage of their own. This paradoxical injunction resonates with the identity claims that are expressed today in a particularly violent manner, notably on social networks.

## Works cited

- Boni, Nazi. *Crépuscule des temps anciens : Chronique du Bwamu*. Présence africaine, 1962.
- Barth, Fredrik. *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries : The social organization of culture difference*. Bergen/Oslo : Universitetsforlaget ; Londres : George Allen & Uwin, 1969.
- Capron, Jean. *Communautés villageoises bwa (Mali-Haute Volta)*. Institut d'ethnologie, 1973.
- Coulibaly, Céleste J. M. *La guerre du Bani-Volta (1915 - 16)*. L'Harmattan, 2017.
- Diarra, Joseph T. *Introduction à l'histoire du peuplement du pays bo du Nord-Ouest (Mali) : Problématique de l'historicité de l'identité ethnique bo*, Thesis in History, Paris I-Panthéon Sorbonne University, 2006.
- Dirlik, Arif. *The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism*. Westview Press, 1997.
- Echenberg, Myron. *Colonial Conscripts. The Tirailleurs sénégalais in French West Africa, 1857-1960*. Heinemann, 1991.
- Galtier, Gérard. « Internet, outil d'un nouveau discours identitaire soninké ». *Afrique contemporaine*, 4(4), 149-51, 2011. CAIRN, <https://doi.org/10.3917/afco.240.0149>
- Gnimien, Gaston. 2016, « Révolte bwa de 1915-16 : Le cours d'histoire de l'Inspecteur Gnimien », Posted by B24 Opinion, <https://www.burkina24.com/2016/09/29/revolte-bwa-de-1915-1916-le-cours-dhistoire-de-linspecteur-gnimien/>, active link at october 2021.

- Leguy, Cécile. “Que disent les noms-messages ? Gestion de la parenté et nomination chez les Bwa (Mali).” *L’Homme*, n°197, 2011, pp.71-92. (English translation: “What Do “Message-Names” Say? The Management of Kinship and the Act of Naming among the Bwa (Mali)”. CAIRN, [https://www.cairn-int.info/article-E\\_LHOM\\_197\\_0071--what-do-message-names-say.htm](https://www.cairn-int.info/article-E_LHOM_197_0071--what-do-message-names-say.htm))
- Leguy, Cécile. ““Est-ce que vraiment nous comptons ?” : Une question d’actualité.” *Cahiers de littérature orale*, Hors-Série, 2020, pp. 117-26. <https://doi.org/10.4000/clo.6896> .
- Millogo, Louis. *Nazi Boni premier écrivain du Burkina Faso : La langue bwamu dans Crépuscule des temps anciens*. Pulim, 2002.
- Royer, Patrick. « La guerre coloniale du Bani-Volta, 1915-16 (Burkina-Faso, Mali) ». *Autrepart*, 2(2), 2003, pp. 35-51. CAIRN, <https://doi.org/10.3917/autr.026.0035>
- Şaul, Mahir. « La jarre révolutionnaire bouillait » : 1915-16 : guerre anticoloniale dans l’Ouest-Volta. *Les Temps Modernes*, 693-94, 2017, pp. 59-86. <https://www.cairn.info/revue-les-temps-modernes-2017-2-page-59.htm>
- Şaul, Mahir and Royer, Patrick. *West african Challenge to Empire: Culture and History in the Volta-Bani anticolonial War*. Ohio University Press, 2001.
- Vennes, Thomas. “*Understanding Colonial Violence : Military Culture, Colonial Context, and the Civilizing Mission in the Volta-Bani War (1915-16)*”. *Strata. La revue d’histoire des étudiants diplômés de l’Université d’Ottawa*, 8, 2018, pp. 87-104.
- Vennes, Thomas, *Civiliser et discipliner : la mission civilisatrice et la culture militaire coloniale lors de la guerre du Bani-Volta (1885-1919)*, Master’s thesis from the Université du Québec à Montréal, 2020.
- Vennes, Thomas, « L’officier, la colonie et l’indigène : conceptions du maintien de l’ordre à travers le *Manuel tactique du groupe de l’AOF* (1910) », in Patrick Dramé et Boris Lukic, *Commandement colonial, résistances et décolonisation - Une histoire de l’Afrique contemporaine*, Sherbrooke, ÉDUS, 2022, pp. 70-90. <http://hdl.handle.net/11143/19144>
- Vydrin, Valentin & Maslinsky, Kirill & Méric, Jean-Jacques & Rovenchak, Andrij. *Corpus Bambara de référence*. 2011–18. <http://cormand.huma-num.fr/>.
- Wimmer, Andreas. *Ethnic Boundary Making. Institutions, Power, Networks*. Oxford University Press, 2013.