

Senegal

Yoro Moussou: a Malinké fortified site in southeastern Senegal

Matthew V. Kroot¹, Cameron Gokee²,
and Camille Machiels³

mkroot@scu.edu

¹Department of Anthropology
Santa Clara University, USA

²Department of Anthropology
Appalachian State University, USA

³Centre for Battlefield Archaeology
University of Glasgow, UK

The fortification of Yoro Moussou

This paper examines the *tata* (fortification wall) and associated archaeological remains of Yoro Moussou, an ancestral Malinké site dating to the late nineteenth and/or early twentieth century. The site is located in the upper Gambia River region of southeastern Senegal, with work at the site being part of the broader Bandafassi Regional Archaeological Projects (BRAP). First reported by Mauny (1963: 122), the site lies 5 km west of the Gambia River and 20 km northwest of Kedougou, the largest town in southeastern Senegal (Figure 1). We argue, based on historical and archaeological evidence, that Yoro Moussou was occupied briefly, if at all, during a period of inter-community conflict.

Yoro Moussou sits in a region known historically as (the) Niokolo, a name shared by a local watercourse and a historical Malinké chiefdom (*jamano*). Historical narratives suggest that the region then evolved into what might be termed a shatter zone at the periphery of Mandé polities (Person 1984), Peul theocracies (Harrison 1988), and Atlantic Era statecraft and slave trade (Carpenter 2012: 72-73). Indeed, oral traditions claim that these latter dynamics led to the construction of Yoro Moussou during a period of great violence in the late nineteenth century. The archaeology of this site illustrates how local defensive strategies intersected with social and political dynamics at play in the Malinké communities of the Niokolo during the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries.

Prior archaeological fieldwork in the upper Gambia River region has been limited. Mauny (1963) noted several sites dating from the Paleolithic to the historic period, including Yoro Moussou. More recently, the appearance of commercial gold mining has led to cultural heritage management projects around Mako and Sabodala (e.g., Altschul, Thiaw & Wait 2016), while efforts to inscribe the Bassari Country as a UNESCO World Heritage Cultural Landscape involved a heritage resource inventory around selected Bassari, Bedik, and Peul communities (République du Sénégal 2011), but excluded Malinké settlements. Within this context, BRAP studies how actors within the village-based communities of the upper Gambia River region responded to regional and global social forces and processes of the past millennium, as well as how people from outside of the area who enacted these forces and processes were integrated into the social life of the region.

Previous scholarly and historical reports of *tatas*

Archaeologists have noted the presence of *tatas* throughout West Africa. Many analyses date *tatas* to the seventeenth-nineteenth centuries and describe them as defensive structures for protection against attacks by Islamic revival states, European colonial forces, and other political and economic associations participating in collective violence associated with the Atlantic System. As pointed out by MacDonald (2012: 345), these fortifications are quite variable in construction technique and scale. For example, the *tata* of Sikasso, Mali was a crenulated structure standing to a height of 6 m and surrounding a 90 ha city. The village of Gwollu in Ghana (Swanepoel 2005: 275) included ditch systems in front of walls to stop cav-

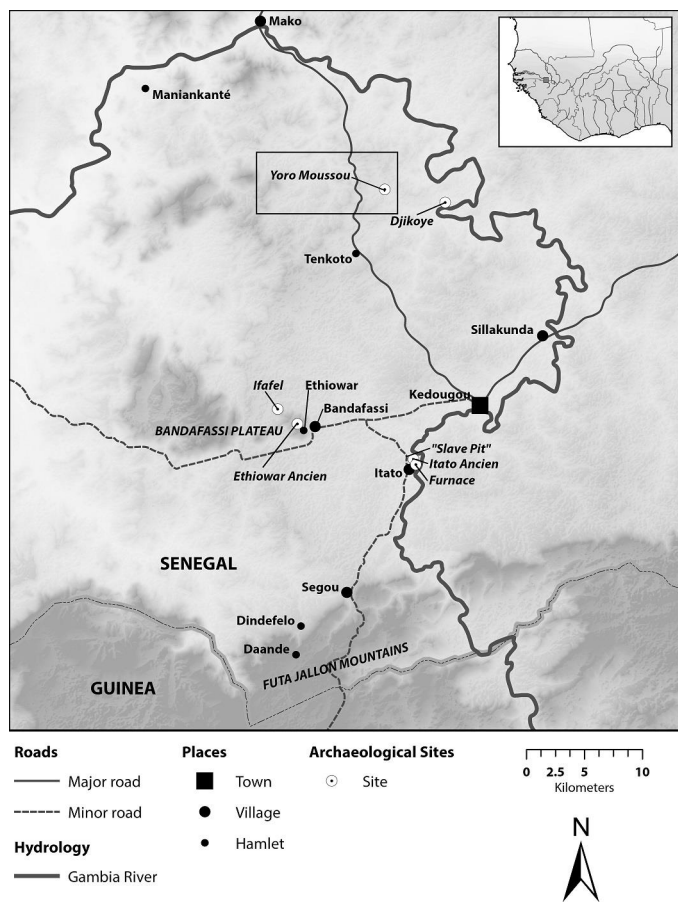


Figure 1: Location of the Bandafassi Regional Archaeological Project study area, Yoro Moussou outline. Map C. Gokee.

alry. DeCorse (2012) has identified a number of methods of fortification beyond the building of walls, including the usage of thorny thickets and rows of trees or the placement of sites on hilltops and in rugged terrain (see also Swanepoel 2005: 272-275).

Historically, *tatas* were extensively recorded by French colonial officials and travelers who visited West Africa in the nineteenth century. For example, Frédéric Carrère, president of the French imperial court, wrote in his description of the villages of the Senegambia, ‘Every village is surrounded by a *tata* to defend the village from approaching enemies in every direction.’ (Carrère & Holle 1855: 145; authors’ translation) In the village of Nétéboulou, in Senegal, the *tata* only protected the houses belonging to a man who Rançon (1894: 18-19) describes as the village chief. Ancelle (1886: 101, 312) observed walls to a height of 4-5 m in the villages of Boulébané and Sansanding in present-day Mali. General Louis Faidherbe,

governor of the French colony of Senegal in 1852-1860 and 1863-1865, observed fortifications at the towns of Mourgoula (Brosselard-Faidherbe & Ancelle 1881: 16) and Bafoulabe, Mali (Brosselard-Faidherbe & Ancelle 1885: 14). In the latter case, Faidherbe described an incident wherein a French military official, in order to put an end to a farmland dispute, offered to aid in the building of a *tata* around the village in exchange for local acceptance of his official partition of the disputed farmland.

More recently Meillassoux (1966: 29) described and/or published colonial era maps generated by French officials for the *tatas* of Goubanko, Médina, Mourgoula, Niantanso, Koumakhana, Fatafi, Koubotoko, Noya, Guignagué, Siékokoto, Koundian, Ouassoulo, Almany Samory, and Bahé located near Kita, Mali, one region from which Malinké communities in the Upper Gambia region trace their ancestry. He explains, ‘The majority of these *tatas*, built by local chiefs or by the villagers themselves, protected almost every village against bandits who wanted to capture slaves or against neighboring armies who had similar intentions’ (Meillassoux 1966: 30; authors’ translation).

How one makes sense of such a vast and variable category of architectural features is indeed a challenge. Connah (2000) argued for the untapped potential of the physical documentation and archaeological and historical contextualization of these sites for theory building in archaeology. *Tatas* are not merely a passive reflection of a general social context of intercommunity violence. The contextual analysis of *tatas* in recent years has helped us to understand such things as the distribution of power between polities and across regions (Usman 2004), the social structure of political power (MacDonald 2012), the development of political hierarchies and large-scale social formations (DeCorse 2012), and the ways in which political and economic entrepreneurs used violence in furtherance of their ambitions (Swanepoel 2005). In this vein, we consider Yoro Moussou as both an active response to aggression between communities and a manifestation of collective action among Malinké communities in the upper Gambia River region.

Historical accounts of Yoro Moussou

The historical accounts of Yoro Moussou collected and published during the 1960s are vague, describing a heavily eroded fortification (Mauny 1963: 122) or a fortified Malinké settlement said to have been partially inhabited by

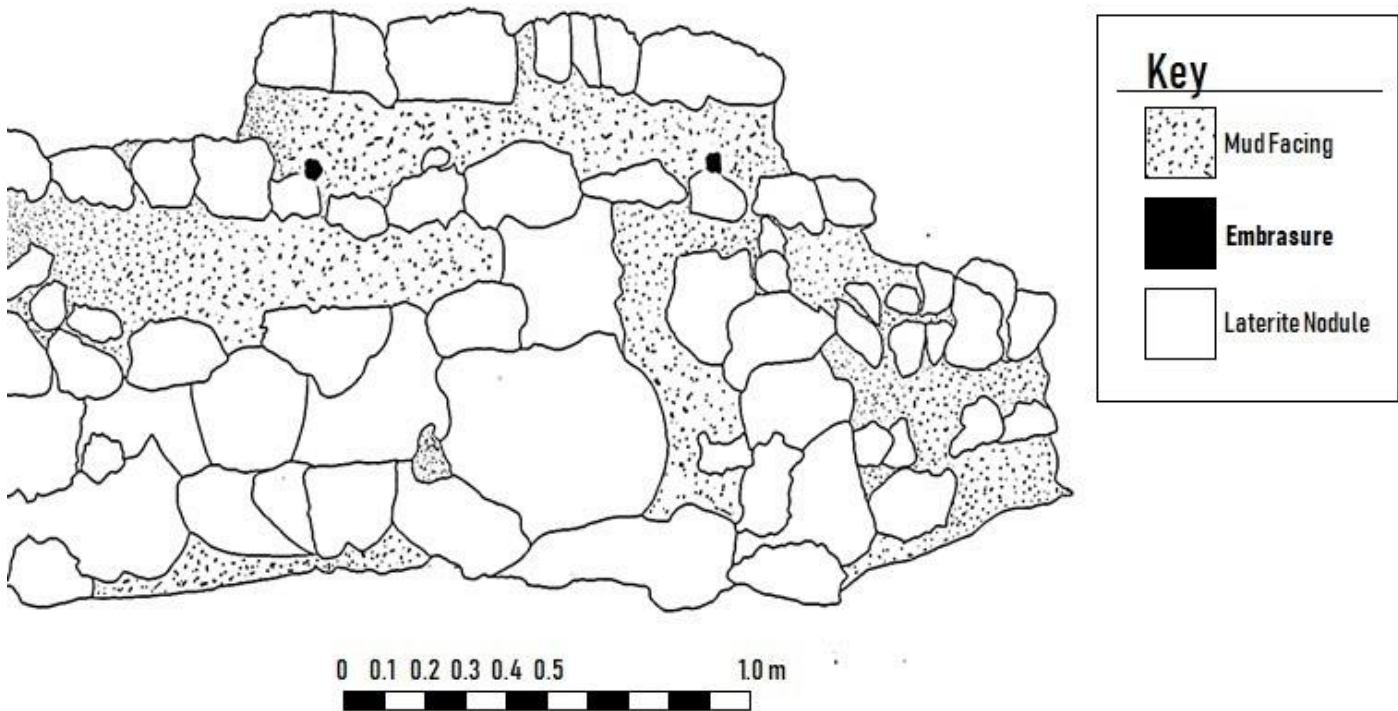


Figure 2: Interior of western bastion north wall at Yoro Moussou, facing north. Drawing C. Machiels.

Bedik refugees fleeing the forces of Alfa Yaya Diallo, a Peul political and military leader from Futa Jallon (Ferry 1967: 130). Alongside our archaeological work at the site, we also held conversations with descendent community members from Malinké villages in the region, including two semi-formal group interviews with prominent older men from the village of Tenkoto. Additionally, we had informal interviews and conversations with local colleagues and inhabitants.

The story of the origins of Yoro Moussou, consistently told by multiple individuals, describes a battle between the Malinké inhabitants of the nearby village of Maniankanté and Peul forces led by Alfa Yaya. Although no specific year is attributed to the battle, it likely dates to around the turn of the twentieth century when the forces of Alfa Yaya are known to have expanded into the broader region (Ferry 1967: 129). Maniankanté was, at the time, the seat of the Keita chiefs of the Niokolo. The Malinké and Peul forces met for battle and when the warriors were face to face, a Malinké woman told the men of her camp that she would sing a song and walk toward the Peul, assuming she would be shot and killed. She told them not to fire until she stopped singing and fell to the ground dead. She walked and sang and when she fell the Malinké attacked, gaining the advantage over the Peul who fled.

After that battle, the inhabitants of Maniankanté built the fortification of Yoro Moussou to house the women and children of their settlement. Local colleagues described the walls as being 4-5 m tall with embrasures. One informant stated that ‘the Malinké stayed at the site of Yoro Moussou for many years, with the fortification being abandoned after the Peul threat seemed to pass.’ The inhabitants of Yoro Moussou then returned to their home village or constructed new settlements. While this account provides details about historical actors and the specific context of the site’s construction, which would be difficult to reconstruct via the archaeological record, it also leaves out many details of the broader social impact of Yoro Moussou. It is clear from these histories that Yoro Moussou represents a novel social formation and one that is historically contingent in comparison to the more durable social structures of Malinké communities in the region. Thus, understanding the specifics of the intersection of defensive strategies and community structures at Yoro Moussou through the archaeological record can further our understanding of the power of the predatory landscapes of the later Atlantic Era to transform societies, as well as the potential resilience of political and economic structures in the face of these pressures.

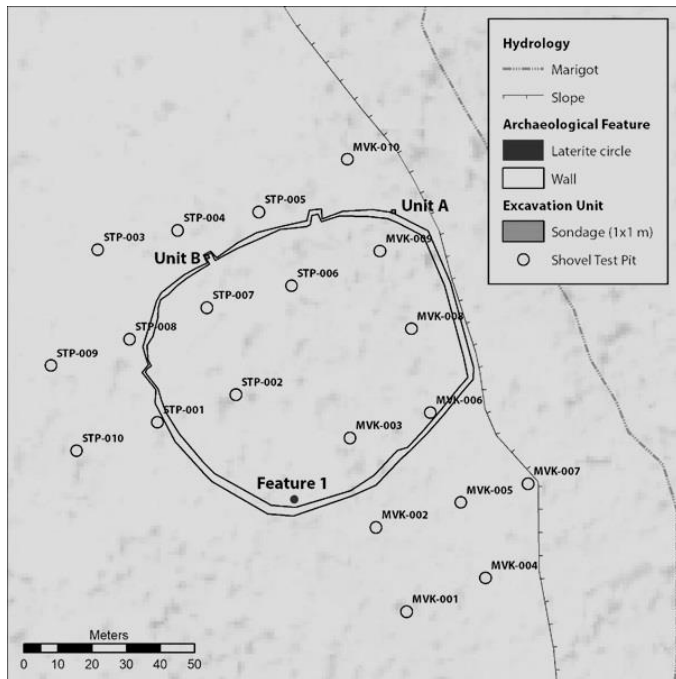


Figure 3: Map of Yoro Moussou, with shovel test-pits, excavation units, and architectural remains. Drawing C. Gokee.

Archaeological investigations at Yoro Moussou

Because of the details of the histories associated with Yoro Moussou, specifically the temporary nature of the habitation of the settlement, our documentation of the site focused on describing the life cycle of the fortification. We began by using a Nikon digital total station to collect 3D points along the visible portions of the fortification wall and the corners of a single flat circular foundation (Feature 1) made of laterite blocks located inside the *tata*. We then took systematic photographs of several upright and collapsed wall sections, which were then traced in illustration software to study construction techniques (Figure 2). Our results reveal that the fortification has an oval shape, measuring 88.1 m east-west and 74.6 m north-south, and enclosing an area of 0.57 ha (Figure 3). Notably, two bastions guard the northern portion of the wall (Figure 4). Although much of the wall has collapsed into a low line of laterite blocks and clay-rich sediment, there are several sections still standing to a height of 1.5 m. Based on the number of laterite blocks collapsed from the wall, it is unlikely that the wall stood much higher than this at the time of construction.

Our study of space within and beyond the fortification walls involved systematic surface collection and



Figure 4: Excavations of bastion interior, Unit B, facing northeast. Photo C. Gokee.

shovel test-pits. BRAP team members began by walking transects at 10 m intervals across the site, placing pin flags next to any artifacts visible on the surface. We then marked these spots with hand-held GPS and scoured them for additional surface finds. In this way we identified two discrete artifact clusters. The first was a small concentration of pottery sherds, likely derived from a single thick-walled, undecorated, brown bodied vessel. These were found inside the fortification wall adjacent to Feature 1. The second was a cluster of knapped stone debitage which was eroding out of the mud plaster exterior of the fortification wall. Given this paucity of surface finds, we also dug a series of shovel test-pits at 25 m intervals across the site. Although these test-pits identified two layers of deposition – a surface deposit of gray silty loam (5-10 cm in depth) and a substratum of orange clay – they yielded no artifacts beyond a single lithic flake.

Finally, we opened two excavation units (1 x 1 m) to better elucidate the construction and collapse of the fortification wall. These included one unit on a collapsed section of the wall (Unit A) and a second unit inside the western bastion (Unit B) (see Figure 4). Neither test unit exceeded a depth of 20 cm, nor yielded any artifacts. They did, however, confirm that the wall was built as a stack of laterite nodules without any significant foundation work.

The wall was then plastered with an exterior coat of fine-grained mud. We interpret a series of round openings, measuring some 5 cm in diameter, as embrasures.

Discussion

The archaeology of Yoro Moussou aligns well with local histories in some respects, yet diverges from them in others. Local Malinké colleagues reported that people lived at Yoro Moussou for many years. However, no artifacts or other evidence of human occupation were recovered at the site, apart from the clusters of knapped stone debitage, which was likely a redeposition from a much earlier off-site occupation, and ceramic sherds from a single vessel. If people did stay at the site for many years, then we could expect far more evidence of anthropogenic accumulation. The fortification at Yoro Moussou architecturally has a great deal in common with *tatas* throughout the region, typically described as surrounding residential sites. However, at Yoro Moussou there were no signs of housing inside or adjacent to the wall, with only a single small architectural feature visible on the surface of the site. The scale of the fortification clearly indicates a great amount of labor and resources devoted to building the wall. The low intensity of domestic activity at the site is, therefore, surprising.

A number of factors could account for this unusual depositional history. There are two possible explanations for the lack of sufficient laterite nodules to construct a 1.5 m high wall, let alone the 4-5 m height claimed by local colleagues: (1) materials from the site were taken for reuse or (2) construction of the wall was never completed. The latter of these explanations seems unlikely as the fortification was faced with mud. This suggests that the structure was either complete or close to completion. However, it is possible that the laterite nodules were faced with mud as they were stacked.

There are also two possible explanations for the lack of significant anthropogenic deposits at the site. It is possible that the *tata* of Yoro Moussou was built as a fortification to retreat into in case of attack or that the site was intended to be inhabited, but, for whatever reason, was not. The fortification at Yoro Moussou seems to have been an outdated defensive structure designed for the last political threat, rather than the future threat of French colonial occupation. Indeed, the regional dominance of Futa Jallon was short-lived. The French government, which had previously supported Alfa Yaya, quickly turned on him using a variety of colonial occupation methods, which

circumvented the need for sustained large-scale military combat in order to assert control over the Niokolo (Harrison 1988: 68-90). Given the broader geopolitical and chronological context surrounding Yoro Moussou, it is likely that the shifting political economy in southeastern Senegal during the later Atlantic Era may be the ultimate cause of the lack of occupation at the site.

The other interesting aspect of the fortification at Yoro Moussou, as compared to other defensive features in the local area and broader region, is the scale of it. The *tata* of Yoro Moussou is one of two known possible fortifications within ancestral Malinké sites in the BRAP study area. The other site containing such a structure is the 1.8 ha village of Djikoye, widely designated as the first Malinké settlement in the region. Local histories describe chiefly power within the Malinké communities of the Niokolo as cycling between Djikoye and Maniankanté (Balicki 1972). Within Djikoye is a central precinct containing three baobab trees and foundations of residential structures, surrounded by a low and heavily eroded earthen berm approximately 30 m in diameter, possibly representing a *tata*. Such a settlement structure manifests a status hierarchy, as is common within Mandé communities throughout West Africa (Jansen 1996).

There are several notable differences between the defensive structures of Djikoye and Yoro Moussou. The fortification wall at Yoro Moussou is significantly larger, with more labor-intensive construction methods. The higher level of investment in construction and the larger scale of the Yoro Moussou *tata* seems to reflect a social difference in the role of defensive architecture at the two sites. Local histories describe the fortification of Yoro Moussou as serving two vulnerable populations within the landscapes of the Atlantic Era: women and children. Additionally, unlike the earthen berm at Djikoye, which only surrounded a select few in the center of a much larger settlement, the substantial walls of Yoro Moussou served the entire population of the site. Thus, the earlier *tata* of Djikoye manifested clear and unequal social differentiation, while the brief life of the wall of Yoro Moussou showed a seeming unity and equality across the community in a time of great stress and risk. Local histories report that this moment was indeed fleeting, with populations leaving the site when they felt the threat of Peul attack had passed, thus ending the social experiment through the re-institution of earlier social relations that underpinned a hierarchical political economy.

Acknowledgements

Support for this research was provided by the Appalachian State University Research Council and the Institute for Field Research. C. Machiels's participation in this work was funded by a SEE-Beyond award from Skidmore College. We would like to thank Abdoul Aziz Guissé of the Ministère de la Culture et du Patrimoine

historique classé au Sénégal and Ibrahima Thaiw of the Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noir for their support. Finally, we would like to thank the communities of Bandafassi for their hospitality and invaluable and generous collaboration.

References cited

Altschul, J.H., Thiaw, I. & Wait, G.

2016. *A Slave Who Would Be King: Oral Tradition and Archaeology of the Recent Past in the Upper Senegal River Basin*. Oxford, UK: Archaeopress.

Ancelle, J.

1886. *Les Explorations au Sénégal et dans les Contrées Voisines Depuis l'Antiquité Jusqu'à nos Jours*. Paris: Maissonneuve Frères et Ch. Leclerc.

Balikci, A.

1972. 'Données historiques sur les Malinké de Bantata. Objets et Mondes.' *La Revue du Musée de l'Homme*, 12(4), 347-350.

Brosselard-Faidherbe, H. & Ancelle, J.

1881. *Le Soudan Français: Chemin de Fer de Médine au Niger; Première partie*. Lille: Imprimerie L. Danel.

1885. *Le Soudan Français: Chemin de Fer de Médine au Niger; Troisième partie*. Lille: Imprimerie L. Danel.

Carpenter, N.R.

2012. *Sovereignty Along a West African Frontier: The creation of the Guinea-Senegal Border, 1850-1920*. University of California, Davis.

Carrère, F. & Holle, P.

1855. *De la Sénégambie Française*. Paris: Librairie de Firmin Didot Frères.

Connah, G.

2000. 'African City Walls: A neglected source?' In D.M. Anderson & R. Rathbone (eds), *Africa's Urban Past* (pp. 36-51). Oxford, UK: James Currey Ltd.

DeCorse, C.R.

2012. 'Fortified Towns of the Koinadugu Plateau: Northern Sierra Leone in the pre-Atlantic and Atlantic worlds'. In J.C. Monroe & A. Ogundiran (eds), *Power and Landscape in Atlantic West Africa: Archaeological perspectives* (pp. 278-308). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Ferry, M.-P.

1967. 'Pour une histoire des Bedik (Sénégal oriental)'. *Cahiers Du Centre de Recherches Anthropologiques* 12(2): 125-148.

Harrison, C.

1988. *France and Islam in West Africa, 1860-1960*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Jansen, J.

1996. 'The Younger Brother and the Stranger: In Search of a Status Discourse for Mande'. *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 36(4): 659-688.

MacDonald, K.C.

2012. 'The Least of their Inhabited Villages are Fortified: The walled settlements of Segou'. *Azania* 47(3): 343-364.

Mauny, R.

1963. 'Contribution à la préhistoire et à la protohistoire de la région de Kédougou (Sénégal Oriental)'. *Cahiers Du Centre de Recherches Anthropologiques* 11(5): 113-122.

Meillassoux, C.

1966. 'Plans d'Anciennes Fortifications (Tata) en Pays Malinké'. *Journal de la Société des Africanistes* 36(1): 29-44.

Person, Y.

1984. 'The Coastal Peoples: from Casamance to the Ivory Coast lagoons'. In D.T. Niane (ed.), *General History of Africa, IV: Africa from the Twelfth to the Sixteenth Century* (pp. 301-323). Paris, France: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

Rançon, A.

1894. *Dans la Haute-Gambie: Voyage d'exploration scientifique, 1891-1892*. Paris: Société d'Éditions Scientifiques.

République du Sénégal.

2011. 'Pays Bassari: Paysages culturels Bassari, Peul et Bedik'. Proposition d'inscription sur la liste du patrimoine mondial H. Bocoum & S. Moriset (eds). Dakar, Senegal.

Swanepoel, N.

2005. 'Socio-Political Change on a Slave-Raiding Frontier: war, trade and "Big Men" in nineteenth century Sisalaland, Northern Ghana'. *Journal of Conflict Archaeology* 1(1): 265-293.

Usman, A.A.

2004. 'On the Frontier of Empire: Understanding the enclosed walls in Northern Yoruba, Nigeria'. *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* 23(1): 119-132.