

# THE ARTICULATION OF THE MOOSE TRADITIONAL CHIEFTAINCIES, THE MODERN POLITICAL SYSTEM, AND THE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF KAYA REGION, BURKINA FASO

Jean-Baptiste Ouedraogo

## Introduction

According to some historians and anthropologists the African continent in the 19th century underwent deep social mutations. These are said to have been the outcome exclusively of an evolutionary process in which economic development brought about the formal modification of political power, and the subjection and spoliation of rural societies. It follows from this view that the answers to the problems of development of African societies must be sought through a better assessment of the modes of interrelation between their political and economic systems.

In brief the purpose of this paper is to analyze the contribution of traditional Moose chieftaincies to the social and economic development of the Kaya region in Burkina Faso. The analysis will throw light upon the clash of two different types of rationales: the political and the economic.

With the democratization that is currently sweeping the Third World, and particularly Africa, contemporary political regimes seem to have regained interest in traditional chieftaincy, which they have formally recognized. What is their purpose in appealing to traditional chieftaincies? Do they seek a shared responsibility in the management of state affairs; if so, what would be practical implications of this? Would each instance of such cooperation be a discrete event

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which left each type of power its autonomy? And if modern political power is seeking an authentically African way of development through the agency of traditional chieftaincy, what are likely to be the terms of this cooperation?

### The Establishment of the Moose Traditional Chieftaincies in the Region of Kaya

The traditional chieftaincy of the Moose in the region of Kaya ranks high in the Moose power hierarchy, being the most important after those of Ouagadougou and Tenkodogo. According to historians and anthropologists, like these chieftaincies it originated in neighboring Ghana.

The region of Kaya is located at about 105 kilometers north of Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso. It covers an area of 14,750 square kilometers with a population of 787,805 people, 8.7% of the population of the country. Its population density is 38 people per square kilometer, whereas the national average is 33 people per square kilometer. The bulk of the population belongs to the Moose group, but other groups such as the Fulbe (Fulani), the Hausa and the Gulmanceba (Gourmanche) also live in the region. It has a Sudanic type of climate and the vegetation that is characteristic of that of climate, scattered trees and shrubs in grassland. Among the predominant species are the *butyros-pernuum parkii*, the *parkia biglobosa*, and the *Khaya senegalensis*. The season of rains runs from May to October, and the total rainfall varies between 650 and 900 millimeters.

The whole economy of the Kaya region is dependent on the regularity and quantity of rain since the population lives primarily from agriculture, stock breeding, and handcrafts. Food production (of millet, corn and rice) as well as market crop production (cotton and peanuts) are steadily increasing under the strong social and political organization of the traditional chieftaincies.

The Moose traditional chieftaincies are comprised of

those which, arising from the [Moose] conquest, organized themselves into states, kingdoms and empires, and those which, arising from the land, structured themselves around ordinary chiefs of lineages or of village communities, [these being] the eldest of the lineage or of the village founders. (Savonnet-Guyot 1985: 29)

All traditional chiefs are customary leaders. Some retain political power which they have organized during the 500 years of conquest and colonization that have

led to the establishment of the 19 kingdoms of the *Moogo* (a term which designates the territory of the Moose, including all the Moose kingdoms).

The latter draws its legitimacy from the *naam*. This term means political power, in both the traditional and the modern sense. (See further Skinner 1970: 190.) It is that power given by God which makes it possible for a man to have authority over another. The Moose conception of political power is based on both the belief in one God, *Wende*, who controls the cosmos, and military conquest. For the Moose the *naam* alone confers power, rather than age or the primacy of occupation. The Moose saying goes: *Talg keem naaba, a keeong ya zaalem*, meaning 'age is irrelevant when it comes to power' (Savonnet-Guyot 1985: 31).

Consequently through the *naam* the Moose subjected the aboriginal populations of peasants and brought them into a state type of social organization. In such a state-like organization, it was incumbent upon some people to ensure order and security, whereas others dedicated themselves to food production. As Françoise Heritier-Auge pointed out,

the state comes into being, be it in its most rudimentary form, whenever there is the capacity to store the surplus of agricultural production, the source of power, in granaries. There are established ipso facto relations of dependency, subjection, or exploitation. (Heritier-Auge 1983: 34)

The aboriginal populations were able not only to supply the Moose with enough crops, but also to save a surplus in anticipation of bad years. Thus, the state was established in a form which could be sustained in the *Moogo* regardless of the pressure of the Islamic states in the North, or the threat of division of the small kingdoms in the central part of the Moose Empire. As Savonnet-Guyot made it clear,

[w]ith a good horse, the protection of *Wende*, and the conviction that they were destined to rule, the Moose had not only the means of conquest, but also the instruments to govern the state, and to prolong their conquest by ensuring its permanence and effectiveness. (Savonnet-Guyot 1985: 31)

The Moose state was to function in this fashion until the advent of colonization that would disrupt both its basis and its functioning.

## The Moose Traditional Chieftaincies Under Colonial Rule

The colonial power understood soon enough that the support of the Moose traditional chiefs was necessary for the good administration of the newly conquered territories, especially since several small kingdoms had already been weakened by endless quarrels among the candidates for the *naam*.

The lack of administrative cadres and of knowledge of those administered force the French to rely upon the local traditional authorities... Progressively the traditional chiefs become second-rank administrators, and instruments of command. (Marchal 1980: 15)

Traditional chiefs acquired a legal status under a law which made provision for their recruitment, responsibilities, and remuneration as well as for sanctions that could be imposed upon them. However, Administrator Buttavand admitted in 1947 that it was a difficult task to lay down a general status that took into account the peculiarities of all chieftaincies.<sup>1</sup> In practice it was by virtue of local customs, and within limits set forth by French legislation, that persons were entitled to the chieftaincy. There was a need for more specific provision defining these limits with respect to the different levels of power that might be conferred on traditional chiefs.

For every chief the limits of his established powers and his nomination are sanctioned by an agreement or a protocol jointly signed by the Governor or his representative, the representatives of the group concerned, namely, those vested by custom with the power to nominate chiefs, and finally the regular chief in office.

The particular region of Kaya was reorganized by the colonial administration. While the territories that constitute Burkina Faso today were united with the then French Sudan (Mali), Niger, and the Ivory Coast, the Governor of the Ivory Coast, Lieutenant Reste, signed a decree on October 10, 1934 laying out the practical modalities of the reorganization of the region of Kaya as follows. This provided for three categories of chiefs:

1. chiefs of autonomous villages coming under a chief of canton, and autonomous villages assisted by village committees;
2. chiefs of districts assisted by district committees;
3. chiefs of cantons assisted by cantonal committees, and, where

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<sup>1</sup> Letter dated September 25, 1947, referring to the ministerial circular No 9145.

needed, chiefs of provinces assisted by a provincial committee.

The village here represented the traditional administrative unit. It comprised the whole population that lived in it, and the lands. Henceforth the chief of village was appointed by the administrator of the region upon the recommendation of the notables sitting in the village committee, even though the latter had under custom the capacity to choose the chief of the village.

The novelty in the social organization of the Moose under colonial rule was the institution of a salary for chiefs. Their salaries were discounted from the poll tax that was collected once a year from the villagers, and the discount rates were set by the Lieutenant-Governor each year.

*The attributions of Moose traditional chiefs and the socio-economic demands of the colonizer*

Beyond his function of administering a general police force, law enforcement being part of his duties, the chief also played a leading role in the economy. He was required to ensure the protection of the environment by preventing the destruction of fields, plants and crops by fire or travelling livestock. He was required to prevent animals from roaming about the fields and the trunk roads, particularly those crossing his village.

It was his responsibility to look after the tree nurseries located within the limits of his village, and also to ensure the food security of the population under his supervision. He was to notify the chief of canton about cases of contagious diseases such as small pox and measles and to isolate the sick. He watched over the butchers the slaughter of animals and was required to report animal diseases. As for justice, in accordance with tradition and the regulation the chief had power to conciliate opponents in civilian or business matters. Finally, he and the inhabitants of the village were to comply with the obligations that the authorities had set down, namely, the implementation of administrative regulations.

In urban centers these responsibilities fell upon the chief of district. The latter was appointed by the Lieutenant-Governor upon the recommendation of the *commandant de cercle*, or the administrator-mayor. The chief of district was assisted by a district committee which functioned in a similar fashion to the village committee.

The canton was formed by a cluster of villages including all their lands. It was created by a decree of the Lieutenant-Governor following the recommendation of the *commandant de cercle*. The chief of canton was placed under the authority of an administrative agent of the colony. He was appointed by the

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Lieutenant-Governor upon the recommendation of the *commandant de cercle*. The chief of canton had the same duties as the chief of village but at a higher level. He was assisted by a cantonal committee which included all the chiefs of the villages that made up the canton.

On top of the Moogo structure we have the province, which is formed by a cluster of cantons. The province was created by a decree of the Lieutenant-Governor and placed under the control of an administrative agent who took the title of chief of province. The chief of province had the same responsibilities as the chief of canton but at a higher level, the provincial level. The chief of province was assisted by a provincial committee which, in principle and in accordance with custom, included the chiefs of the cantons that made up the province.

Finally, the *Moogo Naaba*, the chief of the *Moogo*, was above the province. His responsibilities were defined by custom and ratified by the colonial administration. Consequently he became a privileged auxiliary of the colonial administration, the indispensable intermediary between the colonialist and the population of the region.

The stance of France with regard to traditional chieftaincies was made clear by the French Minister of Overseas Territories, Marius Moutet, in an administrative letter of 1947 stating:

... I must repeat that the traditional chiefs towards whom France has undertaken commitments, which she intends to keep, fully retain their *raison d'être* in modern Africa so long as they are vested with authority in accordance with the consent of their social group. They have their place to hold and their role to play.... There can be no question of promoting a progressive policy in Africa without the support of a solid territorial command, nor even of any possible territorial command which does not rest on the customary authority of the chieftaincies.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, the traditional chief had been and still was the necessary auxiliary of the administration, with the function of transmitting administrative directives to the people.

However, the colonial administration made the choice to resort to the traditional chief not as a civil servant, but only as an auxiliary:

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<sup>2</sup> Marius Moutet, administrative letter dated October 23, 1947, in Circular 47/APS of the Governor of Upper Volta to all Circles, Upper Volta, October 1947.

To turn traditional chiefs into civil servants would not be a satisfactory solution either for them or for us. In the complexity of the administrative procedures of classes and grades of promotion this traditional institution would lose the individuality which gives it its strength and justification.... On the contrary, the chief can and must find legitimate and measurable returns in modern activity. By his efforts he must take part in the socio-economic development of his region.<sup>3</sup>

*The place and the role of the Moose traditional chieftaincies in colonial policy*

Undoubtedly the organization of the Moose traditional chieftaincies simplified and facilitated the administration of the region and the country. In 1916 the Administrator-in chief of the colonies acknowledged this fact, saying: "We have good reasons to resort to traditional chiefs by preserving their authority and by transmitting through their mediation all the orders that we need to transmit to the population".<sup>4</sup>

While they were well aware of their influence over the population, and of their political impact in the management of state affairs, the traditional chiefs were not always fully conscious of their economic role in the development of their regions or the country, nor did they know their exact position in the hierarchy of the colonial administration. They knew that they were required to collaborate faithfully and in an environment of social peace with the colonial administration, but were no further concerned as to the way in which that collaboration might result in social and economic development.

Even though the administrative reform of the *Moogo* took place with no major problems, its government through the implementation of legal texts was to contribute to a weakening of the social and the political position of the chiefs.

The granting of public liberties, the application in the African territories of the metropolitan penal code invalidating the indigenous legal system, the abolition of compulsory labor, the bestowal of the franchise on an elite minority of évolués which had little sympathy for traditional chieftaincies, all these reforms, introduced in 1946, suddenly placed the chiefs in a

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<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> Administrative notice of November 4, 1916.

precarious position. (Savonnet-Guyot 1985: 34-35)

*The Moose traditional chieftaincies and modern political power in the early years of independence*

After the country's accession to independence in 1960, the new political authorities set about reducing the power and influence of traditional chiefs.

On June 8, 1962, a decree was made suspending the remuneration of chiefs and prohibiting their replacement in the event of death or resignation. Thus the traditional chiefs were deprived of all the privileges they had been given under colonial rule in recognition of their services.

On July 28, 1964, another decree instituted the election of the chiefs of village by universal and direct suffrage of the villagers with the possibility for anyone to run for election. The effect was that the principle by which the chiefs were normally designated by the notables in conformity with tradition was undermined and the very basis of the *naam* was shaken.

The worst was still to come. A decree made on January 26, 1962, decree prohibited all insignia, external marks and public manifestations of the former traditional hierarchies. It continued: "In particular, the wearing of a cloth as a sign of social rank, i.e., either as a chief or as a slave, is prohibited. Also prohibited are all practices of subordination that violate the principles specified in the Constitution of the Republic and by which all citizens are equal".<sup>5</sup>

### The Moose Traditional Chieftaincies, Modern Political Power and Development

Clearly the administrative measures taken in the early days of independence by the political authorities were aimed simply at suppressing the Moose traditional chieftaincies. The chieftaincies then joined the opposition parties, which succeeded in overthrowing the first Republic on January 6, 1966. The Moose traditional chiefs were rehabilitated and their privileges restored.

In return, as the Moose traditional chieftaincies constituted one of the major sociopolitical forces with a mobilizing capacity, they were expected to assist in

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<sup>5</sup> Decree no 32-PRES of 26 January 1962 *interdisant le port d'insignes ou de signes extérieurs de caractere feodal sur le territoire voltaïque.*

bringing into the coffers of the state the products of taxes and duties and generally in putting right the economy and the finances of the country. It was obvious to the political and administrative authorities that the Moose territories could not be properly ruled without the traditional institution which the chiefs control.

For the Moose the *naam* is in nobody's possession. Rather it is perceived as an efficient instrument for the development of the *Moogo*. That is why they have developed diverse inter-regional and even international trade. The policy of developing trade led, for instance, in the colonial period to the signing of a trade agreement on October 30, 1939 between the colony of the Ivory Coast, represented by Administrator-in-Chief Louveau, and the colony of the French Sudan, represented by Administrator-in-Chief Emerit. Under this agreement the Moose, particularly those of Kaya and Ouahigouya, were to provide 900 cows every month so that the neighboring colonies might be supplied with meat. The Moose in return were to get cola nuts from the Ivory Coast, and salt and smoked fish from Sudan. This agreement was certainly dictated by economic necessity, but it also offered an opportunity to expand the influence of the Moose on the basis of the *naam*.

Within the *Moogo* itself the need to expand the state ascendancy was characterized by customary dues. Greeting the chief was a social obligation for his subjects, and they would always greet him with numerous and various kinds of presents such as millet, animals, money (cowries at that time), or even maidens. That is why there is a Moaaga proverb that says: *Naab ka Wend n puusd nug zaal ye*, which means 'you don't greet the chief like you would pray to God, with empty hands!' The chief was furthermore entitled to numerous benefits such as the hoeing of his fields.

Commenting on the Moose's ability to exercise the *naam*, Savonnet-Guyot observed:

[I]n order to invest a social reality that constantly grows in complexity as the field appropriated by the state expands, the Moose political power will consider taking advantage of the existence of socio-professional categories whose activities are indispensable to the development and prosperity of the state.  
(Savonnet-Guyot 1986: 119)

The different political regimes between November 25, 1980 and August 4, 1983 have either taken the side of the Moose traditional chieftaincies or have fought against them. The revolutionary regime of the National Council of the Revolution headed by Captain Thomas Sankara was the most antagonistic towards the Moose traditional chieftaincies. Indeed, that regime passed a series of administrative

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decrees to suppress the remuneration and the various benefits of the chiefs.

In this way, all the decrees that regulated the mode of designation of the chiefs of village, those that set the territorial limits between customary and administrative authorities as well as all the decrees relative to the remuneration and fees of traditional chiefs in Upper Volta were abrogated. (Savonnet-Guyot 1986: 188<sup>6</sup>)

As if history was repeating itself, these challenges to the role and the place of traditional chieftaincies in the modern state of Burkina Faso were soon to cause the downfall of the Revolutionary Government on October 15, 1987, and the rise of Captain Blaise Compaore's Popular Front.

Once again the Moose traditional chiefs became the partners of the state regime. By treating them favourably the new regime has managed to restore trust and an harmonious collaboration between the traditional and the modern political powers. For the Moose remain convinced that, as long as they keep faith in *Wende*, and with the help of the Earth (as a divinity and a nourishing source), nothing can overcome the *naam*. The Moose express that conviction in the proverb, *wend ka ningid naam yand ye*, which means 'God never allows the humiliation of the *naam*'.

This new social and political environment created by the Popular Front, favorable to both the traditional and the modern forms of power, made it possible for Burkina Faso to move smoothly from two decades of exceptional (military) Government into a democratic system of government. The adoption of the new Constitution on June 2, 1991 marked the beginning of the Fourth Republic. With the presidential elections of December 1991 and the legislative elections in 1992, the republican institutions were reestablished.

The regime in power is now aware that the Moose traditional chieftaincies constitute a very strong sociopolitical force, and that without their support it would be unable to reach either rural or urban voters. In return the Moose traditional chieftaincies know that they also need the support of modern power in order to preserve their control over the rural masses.

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<sup>6</sup> Citing *Bulletin quotidien d'Afrique*, AFP, 6 February 1984.

## Conclusion

The present democratic government has managed to reestablish a balance between traditional and modern political power. Through the ups and downs of the political history of the country, that equilibrium has proven to be precarious. The question now is: for how long will the present balance be sustained? Does the strong political commitment of traditional chiefs work towards the strengthening or the alienation of custom and tradition?

The present political power has allied itself with the Moose traditional chieftaincies. What will be the consequence of such an alliance for its independence and autonomy? Will it enhance or jeopardize them?

The major question in this new sociopolitical context relates to the attitudes of the peasants who constitute the social basis of the regime. As time goes by, is there not a risk that the trust in the institution of traditional chieftaincy may be imperceptibly lost?

In the absence of a large body of political data, it is difficult to provide complete answers to all of these questions. However, it remains obvious that a constant search for consensus is the only political means by which the country can be governed with the participation of all, and with the rationales of traditional and modern political powers becoming complementary.

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