



The Wasangari

Politics and Identity in Borgu

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Abstract. – This article seeks to examine the role of the Wasangari in providing identity for Borgu, which was a frontier state in the precolonial period of West Africa. The Wasangari constituted a major political group in the early Borgu kingdoms (Bussa, Illo, and Nikki). As descendants of Kisra (the eponymous ancestor of the Borgu people), the Wasangari were known as dynastic founders who symbolized political identity. As traditional worshippers who were anti-Islamic in ideology, the Wasangari embodied religious identity. And, as warriors, they epitomized military identity. With these, the Wasangari were able to solve the problem of identity crisis, which had existed in Borgu before their arrival. [*West Africa, Nigeria, Borgu, Wasangari, identity, Dandawa, Wangara, Yoruba, clans, Kisra legend*]

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Nigerian Borgu is a frontier society that experienced an identity crisis in its early history. A significant transformation occurred when the Wasangari immigrant group arrived in the region in the sixteenth century. The Wasangari provided three distinct forms of identity for the Borgu: political (by establishing dynasties), religious (by being anti-Islamic), and military (by claiming invincibility). Politically, the Wasangari reconfigured Borgu politics and society from a segmented lineage orientation to a centralized structure by establishing a monarchical and dynastic system. The main Borgu

kingdoms of Bussa, Illo, and Nikki, and the smaller chiefdoms founded in the nineteenth century compared in structure with the Hausa states, the Nupe Kingdom, and the Oyo Empire. In contemporary political and administrative arrangements, Nigerian Borgu belongs to the middle belt of the country, straddling the Niger and Kwara States. Ethnic and geopolitical identities have been a major part of the history of Nigerian societies and Borgu is identified with its past military tradition and anti-Islamic ideology.

Politics in Pre-Wasangari Borgu

In the Iron Age period Borgu was a “geographical expression,” without any distinct political structure. Small communities inhabited the region around the bend of the River Niger. When these communities evolved is uncertain, but artifacts, which include pottery, iron weapons, and terracotta figurines, recovered from archaeological sites such as Kagogi, Monia, Kabigera, and Old Bussa, and dated between ca. 100 and 700 A.D., attest to the advanced technology and material culture. They also reveal the interactions between the people of Borgu and other communities, presumably from the Nok Culture (Priddy 1970a, 1970b). The scattered communities were autonomous of each other and they lay claims to either an indigenous or migration tradition. Clan migration into Borgu occurred from different parts of West Africa, especially from Mali and Songhay. In the southern part, the Yoruba popu-

lation was found mostly in the chiefdoms of Ilesha, Okuta, and Kenu.

Ethnographic data show that the Boko who inhabited the Bussa region, and of whom Karabonde was the chief, were the descendants of the Mandingo people. Aside from the Boko, other early immigrations included the Laru, whose language has been classified as belonging to the Mossi-Dagomba group, the founders of Kanibe (Dogon Gari). There was another wave of immigration of Kiengawa which settled first at Komi and subsequently at Wawa (NNAK 1910).

The most important migration, because it transformed Borgu politics and society, was that which was led by Kisra. Regarded as the eponymous ancestor of the Borgu people, Kisra was believed to have migrated from Persia and his descendants, known as the Wasangari, became dynastic founders, thereby reconfiguring Borgu politics and society. The Wasangari have been identified with politics through the name Kisra, which means the “Black King” in the Batonu language.¹

The predynastic social, cultural, and political organization of Borgu revolved around the clan and lineage. Lineage administration and a patrilineal social system characterized the Borgu society before the arrival of the Wasangari.² Some of the clans included Mora (chiefly), Yari and Mako (drummer), Seko (blacksmith), and Bare, Sesi, and Yari (commoner). The *gari* (elders) performed important political roles as lineage heads, even though they were not institutionalized rulers. Because of the conspicuous absence of a rigid governmental bureaucracy, the communities fall within the category of segmentary societies, which John Middleton and David Tait (1958) described as “tribes without rulers.”

In the northern part of Nigerian Borgu, the Boko, who populated the Babanna (Aliyara) District and the Lopawa (a riverine group), claimed to be the indigenous population. The Laru who migrated from Kengakwe in Argungu, established agricultural communities at Lashibe, Kagogi, Shagunu, Sansani, and Sagwagwui, also claimed that they inhabited the region “prior to the arrival of the followers of Kisra [the Wasangari]” (NNAK 1926d). There was a relative peaceful coexistence among these communities, as ethnographic data in-

dicated that “villages did not wage war against each other but remained on terms of friendship” (NNAK 1940).

In the Bussa region where the Karabonde people claimed to be *in situ* when the descendants of Kisra arrived, the Ba-Karabonde (Earth Priest) and the Bamode (Spiritual head) provided leadership for the community (NNAK 1926a, 1935b). Acting as the “political” leader, the Ba-Karabonde resided at Old Bussa but the Bamode lived at Monai. The name *ba wa kara a bo de*, has changed to Ba-Karabonde, meaning “the old man, the one we met” (NNAK 1935b). Since they were the first settlers, the Karabonde people claimed ownership of the land. Because the economy of the Borgu people was based largely on farming, hunting, and fishing, earth priests performed propitiatory sacrifices to the gods to bless the land and to grant them good harvest.

While the indigenous people were concerned about preserving ownership of the land, according to Musa Idris (1975b: 144), immigrants, especially the Wasangari, were more interested in taking political control. Hence, the Wasangari did not initially appropriate land from the aborigines. For example, the king of Bussa did not claim land rights because it belonged to the Karabonde indigenous people.³ This arrangement, however, changed after the Wasangari had secured political power and the right to distribute land to new immigrants. Although the earth priests retained their sacerdotal powers, the Wasangari assumed the power to distribute land as a symbol of political control over the people. This emerged from the idea that the land and the people who live on it belonged to the king, and in the contemporary African economy, political authority is often associated with control of the land.

The Formation of a Political Identity

Richard Kuba is of the opinion that elements of state organization existed in Borgu before the Wasangari arrived (1996: 56f.). Evidence of socially and politically interactive clans, and lineage heads providing political leadership, give strong credibility to this claim. There was, however, no centralized or unified force and no well-preserved state system in the pre-Wasangari period. Hence, the Borgu region did not have any recognizable political identity.

1 For detailed information of Kisra as the Black King, see Julius O. Adekunle (2004: chap. 3).

2 Jack Goody described this type of acephalous organization as “weakly centralized federations ... [where] the concentration of royal power is accompanied by systems of succession that are at once lineal and more determinate” (1966: 39).

3 NNAK 1926a. The same position of prerogative over land by the early settlers occurred at Wawa, Kaiama, Ilesha, and Okuta, all located in southern Borgu.

The formation of a well-defined political system and institutions began with the Wasangari who established a feudal system in the three main kingdoms and set up numerous chiefdoms over autonomous societies that were formerly controlled by lineage heads. The Wasangari might have used military force to gain control of some Borgu settlements, but some lineage heads submitted to the new and militarily powerful immigrants. While the first wave of Wasangari rulers established the three main kingdoms and dynasties, the second wave founded the numerous chiefdoms in southern Nigerian Borgu in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They all legitimized their rule by ultimately tracing their genealogical roots to Kisra. In this sense, Kisra, represented by the Wasangari, became a symbol of identity, which both the indigenous and immigrant populations now associate with. As argued elsewhere, the Wasangari used their military power to consolidate a defence system, which ultimately produced the formation of an identity for Borgu (Adekunle 1994b).

Illo was the smallest of the three kingdoms. It was here where Bio Sheru (Aguza), the first Wasangari ruler, took over leadership from the earth priests (Harris n. d.). According to British colonial officials who collected ethnographic and anthropological data, the Illo kingdom was established in a region believed to have “consisted of uninhabited bush” before it was occupied by a part of the wave of immigrant Kishira [Wasangari] people who came from the East at a very early date. Exactly when this occupation took place is difficult to say, for the chief of Illo puts it at some fourteen centuries ago (NNAK 1926b). The Ba-Kperude, Ba-Ferinde, and Ba-Kwakwa were the earth priests (NNAK 1907; Idris 1975b: 219f.), who as religious leaders were not empowered to exercise political power and authority. The Wasangari ruling class filled this vacuum. Accordingly, most of what is known about the early history and political structure of Illo relates to the Wasangari (NNAK 1907).

The Bussa kingdom overshadowed Illo in military and political powers. Arriving in the Bussa region under the leadership of Woru (one of Kisra’s sons), the Wasangari imposed their political hegemony on the Karabonde community whose lineage head was relegated to the background. Military supremacy as a result of the use of iron weapons and the Karabonde belief in the Wasangari’s use of magic may have made it relatively easy for the Wasangari to dominate the Karabonde. An ethnographic record (NNAK 1937) indicates that:

Before the arrival of Kisra [the Wasangari] the settlement [in Bussa, along the River Niger] reached as far north as Shagunu, west to Luma, south to Malali and the Niger formed the eastern boundary – in fact, the present Bussa District. This area was a loosely knit federation with two related families at the head. The more important family with the Karaburdi [Karabonde] as chief lived at Old Bussa, Bamode (who is always referred to even now as the “brother” of Karabondi [karabonde]) lived at Mondi.

The Wasangari evolved a power-sharing structure in Bussa. They assumed political leadership and allowed the Bamode to provide sacerdotal functions. Three ruling houses emerged in Bussa, but only one of them (Gbemusu) produced the longest line of rulers.⁴ Marjorie Helen Stewart described the Etebora as the “super” ruling house, but the line came to an end with the reign of Kigera I (ca. 1737–1752). Kitoro I (ca. 1752–1768) established the Kunaide line when he ascended the throne and the Fuyin took over from this line. Yerima Ibrahim (1799–1814) was the only ruler from the Gambui line. In 1814 when Kitoro II (1814–1830) came to power, he formed the Gbemusu line. The Abobarasu ruling house emerged under Kitoro II’s successor, Kissan Dogo (1830–1845). The Gbemusu ruling house has produced the ruler since the reign of Kigera II (1876–1892).⁵

Hugh Clapperton, a Scottish explorer to Borgu between 1824 and 1827, considered Bussa as the head of the Borgu kingdoms and its ruler as “The Lord of Borgu” (Crowder 1973: 29–31). However, during the famous “Race for Nikki” in 1894, Captain Frederick Lugard, who signed a treaty of protection with the King of Nikki on behalf of the Royal Niger Company (RNC), described him as “King of Nikki, and of all Borgu Country” (Crowder 1973: 30). Thus a controversy existed in determining which Borgu ruler was chief sovereign. Irrespective of their position, all the Wasangari rulers enjoyed power, prestige, and high political status before and during the colonial period.

Military Identity

There is no surviving written record or oral information regarding Borgu’s military encounters with its neighbors such as the Nupe and Yoruba before the arrival of the Wasangari. But because of

4 Rulers were produced in the following order: Gbemusu (8), Fui (3), Gambui (1); see Stewart (1993: 163).

5 The last Emir is from the Gbemusu ruling house (NNAK 1951; Stewart 1978).

the link with the Nok culture, there was the development of blacksmithing among the Karabonde, which suggests that farming implements as well as weapons were manufactured. The swiftness with which the Wasangari dominated Borgu supports the subjugation of the indigenous communities through military conquest. Leo Frobenius in "The Voice of Africa" (1968: 917f.), pointed to the military capability and supremacy of the Wasangari by claiming that they subjected the whole Borgu. Supporting this conquest theory, J. D. Fage claimed that "Kisra [the Wasangari] eventually got as far as Borgu ... conquered the three areas around Bussa, Borgu, and Yorubaland ..." (1965: 48). This indicates that the Wasangari were involved in a series of wars of conquest with the small autonomous communities before they imposed their political hegemony.

Information gleaned from Nupe and Oyo records indicates evidence of warfare in the sixteenth century. Oral and written Borgu data assert that since the arrival of the Wasangari no outside invader has ever conquered Borgu. This claim provided the Borgu with a military identity of invincibility, and the Wasangari rulers and their people blithely narrate this warrior tradition. E. W. Bovill, in his "The Golden Trade of the Moors," affirmed that "the Borgawa were warlike pagans with long experience of the great defensive possibilities of their country. They had never lost their independence, in spite of having had to withstand assaults on it by such formidable warrior kings as Sonni Ali and Askia the Great" (1995: 182). The Borgu forces reportedly routed the Songhay army at Gwangwarake (Hogben and Kirk-Greene 1966: 255). The Borgu people claim that the series of wars between the Yoruba and Nupe ended in victory for the Borgu forces. A particular example of Borgu's victory over the Yoruba people has been mentioned in ethnographic records, which refer to the war between Kaiama and the Oyo-Yoruba. The war occurred in the last decade of the eighteenth century when Wasangari rulers were reasserting themselves and the Oyo Empire was gradually declining. Leading his 4,000 bowmen and 50 horsemen, Sabi Agba defeated the Yoruba forces at Gberegburu (NNAK 1933a). Referring to the same war, Lionel Abson, Governor of the British fort at Whydah stated that "... the Iho [Oyo] ... have received two months ago a total overthrow from a country by name Barrabas [Bariba/Borgu] having lost in the battle 11 [eleven] umbrellas and the generals under them ..." (Akinjogbin 1967: 164f.). The nineteenth century was an era of wars for the Borgu society and the people remained assured of their invincibility.

The success of the Borgu forces has been attributed to their mastery of "the arts of ambush and night attack, and they had a reputation for their knowledge of witchcraft and arrow-poisons" (Hogben and Kirk-Greene 1966: 102). In his encounter with the Borgu people in the nineteenth century, Frederick Lugard confirmed their military prowess and qualities. The military success of the Borgu people has been recorded in songs, names, and proverbs. For example, they used to sing in the Batonu language: "*Yegu gariba yi temana. Sian anadare, kaban ka wen kpin, dororo*" (You warriors should endure. By this time of tomorrow some people [enemies] will be in long ropes; Shiroku Abudu, Nov. 26, 1990).

While evidence supports the Borgu people's involvement in numerous wars with their neighbors, the claim to invincibility has to be critically re-examined. The royal traditions of the Wasangari present a glowing military picture in order not to undermine their warrior tradition, but are silent on the defeats the Borgu people suffered. This aspect cannot be ignored. After Illo and Bussa were founded, a long period of silence exists in which little is mentioned about the Wasangari rulers. The silence has been attributed to Borgu defeats by militarily powerful neighbors. The most referred to example was the invasion of Borgu by the Songhay Empire in the early sixteenth century. In his "Sudanese Memoirs" (1928), H. R. Palmer asserted that the Songhay Empire invaded Borgu, and Michael Crowder also affirmed that claim, but they differed on dates. While Crowder placed the invasion at 1504, Palmer put it at between 1536 and 1556. Palmer's information was derived from Es Saidi who described the catastrophe Borgu suffered by saying that "Bussa was completely ruined and a great number of persons perished in the waters nearby [the River Niger]" (Palmer 1928: 81; Crowder 1966: 47). In the encounter, the Wasangari ruling houses were not only defeated and overthrown; they were also relegated into insignificance. To ensure that the Borgu forces did not organize a counterattack, Songhay troops were stationed in Kubli, northwest of Nigerian Borgu. The military and political humiliation experienced by the Borgu accounted for their silence on this matter, especially since such defeats went against the royal traditions of the Wasangari.

Mervyn Hiskett suggested that the Songhay invasion of Borgu was not politically motivated but driven by the desire to spread Islam to a purely and notoriously traditionalist society. Previous attempts to convert the Borgu people had failed to yield positive results. Therefore, the Borgu became

enemies of Islam and in turn the Songhay Islamic Empire (Hiskett 1984: 126). The Songhay Empire did not establish its political dominance on Borgu, but it was during this period that the Wangara Muslim merchants were able to penetrate Borgu. Even though Islam had not become a powerful force in the Wasangari political system, Muslim communities began to form and mosques were constructed.

Two interconnected factors contributed to the revival of the military reputation of the Borgu people between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The first factor was the flowering commerce of the Wangara merchants and the control of the economy by the Wasangari rulers. Connected with that was the rise of ambitious Nikki princes who were establishing satellite chiefdoms in southern Nigerian Borgu. One of the motives behind the formation of chiefdoms was to divert the trade routes away from Nikki. For example, Sabi Agba (1771–1785) of Kaiama became so powerful that he was able to defeat the Yoruba forces in 1783. Also, the Tosu royal clan of Okuta grew in political and military influence, fighting a series of wars with other Borgu towns as well as the Yoruba and Dahomey.

Combined with the revival of the political and military reputation of the Wasangari, was the determination to resist the spread of Islam and to withstand Muslim forces. This determination was translated into action in the Ilorin War of 1837 between the Oyo-Yoruba and Fulani Muslims. Events leading to the Ilorin War began about 1820 when Afonja, the Oyo-Yoruba military leader, nursed an ambition of carving out an empire for himself. To achieve that ambition, he revolted against the Alaafin and sought the military support of the Muslim Fulani. Willing to display their military supremacy and to halt the rapid spread of Islam, the Wasangari readily accepted the invitation of the Yoruba against the Muslims. The Borgu and Yoruba coalition forces faced a common enemy – the Muslims. Leading the Borgu forces were Eleduwe, Woru Kpera, the king of Kaiama, and Gajere or Jiki Masa (representing the king of Bussa). Information from Musa Idris's comprehensive list of participants suggests that more Wasangari rulers participated in the Ilorin War than mentioned in published works.⁶

The combined Yoruba-Borgu forces initially succeeded in repelling or defeating the Fulani forces on three different occasions and locations. The Wasangari experience in the use of night attack, poisoned arrows, and guerilla warfare was put into effective utilization. However, the Fulani bounced back, organized, and in a counterattack inflicted a crushing and humiliating defeat on the Yoruba-Borgu forces. All the Borgu rulers who participated in the war were killed except for Gajere of Bussa. Hogben and Kirk-Greene were of the opinion that the Fulani were able to defeat the coalition of Yoruba-Borgu forces because the army general of the Borgu people was killed and "their morale collapsed" (1966: 421).

One major outcome of the war was the damage done to the military reputation and identity of the Wasangari rulers. This defeat put the pressure on them to redeem their warrior tradition. Current traditions, however, fail to recognize the defeat, rationalizing that the Fulani did not directly attack the Borgu people; they only assisted the Yoruba people. In spite of this defeat, the Borgu people continue to pride themselves in military prowess, and in the fact that they maintain their political autonomy – not being controlled by the Fulani who took over Ilorin, part of Yorubaland. The lasting impacts of the Ilorin War include the spread and recognition of Islam, and the institution of the Fulani Muslim political rule over Ilorin.

Religious Identity

The Wasangari have been identified as traditional worshipers and their anti-Islamic ideology is well-mentioned in the Kisra tradition. According to that tradition, Kisra, the eponymous ancestor and culture hero of the Borgu people, was a traditionalist who, along with his followers, migrated from Mecca because of his opposition to Islam and refusal to convert (NNAK 1926c; Stewart 1993: 147). Kisra's descendants (the Wasangari), found in many parts of West Africa, have become synonymous with this anti-Islamic sentiment. Arriving in Borgu where Islam was hitherto unknown, the Wasangari met communities who practiced traditional religion, and this provided a good religious blend.

⁶ The list includes: Akpaki Timkpoko (Chief of Parakou), Asabaru (Wasangari of Ilesha), Bio Damira (Wasangari of Bussa), Bio Kura (Wasangari of Gbodebere), Buru Gumurumaro (Wasangari of Darakou), the chief of Illo, Dafia Sorou (Chief of Kouande), Dagwara (Wasangari of Ilesha), Gajere (Wasangari of Bussa), Ki-Yaru Iloride (Chief of Kaiama),

Ki-Yoma (Chief of Gwette), Koto Gbodokpunon (Chief of Okuta), Magai Kabe (Prince of Wawa), Mora Lafia (Chief of Ilesha), Sero Kpera (King of Borgu – commander of the allied forces), Sonni ali (Chief of Gwanara), and Yoru Yerima (Wasangari of Nikki) (Idris 1975b: 281).

With the Wasangari in power, the Borgu people were able to strengthen their worship of traditional religions. They became identified as pagans. E. W. Bovill affirmed that “the Borgawa were warlike pagans” (1995: 182). Prominent among the several gods in the pre-Wasangari era were Lashi (god of fertility) and Jekanna (invoked in childbirth, sickness, and wealth) (NNAK 1926a). Anthropological records show that approximately 360 distinct gods and goddesses existed in Borgu before the Wasangari arrived (NNAK 1910). The Wasangari added more including Aganakunbegun (the chief deity) and Zaka (the god of storms and winds).⁷ The gods and goddesses that really identified the Wasangari as pagans were Lata, Manata, Uzza, Safa, and Maruwa because they existed in pre-Islamic Mecca.⁸

The Kisra legend includes the unsuccessful efforts of the house of Bamarubere, sent by the Prophet Mohammed, to convert Kisra and his traditionalist group. In spite of their failure, the Bamarubere settled in Borgu along with the Wasangari (NNAK 1951). The Dandawa Muslims who migrated to Borgu from Timbuktu were also ineffective in converting the Borgu people. The Dandawa were such devout Muslims, that men were not allowed to marry nor were women permitted to be given in marriage until they learn the Qur'an by heart. One of the reasons for the failure of the Dandawa was that they did not inter-marry with the indigenous people. Hence their impact in terms of conversion was small (NNAK 1933b). The Dandawa belong to the Taruwere clan, headed by the Ba-kpakpe, and their Dandawan descendants are now Islamic teachers and *mallams*.

Aside from the Dandawa, the Muslim Wangara merchants from Songhay and the Fulani from northern Nigeria also failed to convert the Wasangari rulers. For example, in 1820, under Magajin Mallam (Mohammah, son of Mallam Dendo), the Fulani unsuccessfully attacked Borgu on two occasions (Hermon-Hodge 1929: 122). At Kaiama in 1823, a religious insurrection broke out when Magajin Mallam began to preach Islam. The Muslim community of Kaiama was very small in 1823 and, therefore, it was not difficult for the military under Ki-Taku to quench the revolt. Following the uprising, Mora Amali (the chief of Kaiama,

1810–1827), promulgated some laws to halt the continued spread of Islam (NNAK 1941).

Rather than convert, the Wasangari devised resistance strategies in order to preserve their anti-Islamic identity. One of the strategies was the observance of the Gani festival, which was the most important traditional celebration throughout Borguland (NNAK 1951). Gani, a harvest festival for farmers and fishermen, was a mechanism to invoke the god of fertility as well as to consolidate intercommunity relationships. It was a symbol of unity. Its weeklong celebration was marked with songs, drumming, and dances, especially the Gidda, Konkoma, Sansanu, and Teke dances.⁹ The festival survived until the arrival of the Europeans in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Because of their strong opposition to Islam, Sultan Bello of Sokoto described the Borgu people as, “devils and of stubborn nature” (Anene 1965: 214), a rebellious and disobedient people who failed to embrace the Islamic Faith.

Two factors did eventually foster religious transformation. They were the loss of an anti-Islamic identity and the triumph of Islam in Borgu at the turn of the twentieth century. First, in the late nineteenth century, the Borgu people recorded military success over their Nupe and Yoruba neighbors who had permitted the Wangara Muslim merchants to operate in Borgu. As mentioned above, the persecution of the Wangara merchants by the Wasangari was one of the factors that prompted the Songhay invasion of Borgu between 1500 and 1504. When the Nupe and Yoruba controlled Borgu territories, Muslim clans such as Mane, Taruwere, and Ture thrived and were permitted to spread Islam so that by the nineteenth century, when the Wasangari revived their political and military power, they became less aggressive and antagonistic towards Islam and the proselytizing activities of its followers. During this period the influence of Islam began to manifest on the society. The second factor was colonialism. Introducing the Indirect Rule system in northern Nigeria, where the feudal and theocratic form of government suited their colonial administration, the British supported the Islamization of Borgu. The British even categorized Borgu as a Muslim region, and adopted the title Emir for the kings of Bussa and Kaiama, who were elevated to the position of paramount rulers. There is no evidence that these rulers were actually Muslims.

7 Others include Gbandi, Gbedidora, Gbera, Gberadi, Gombara, and Miyidi (NNAK 1935, 1937).

8 Al-Lat (sun), al-Uzza (time), and Manat (Venus) were referred to as “the daughters of Allah,” in what was called “Satanic Verses.” These names were removed from the Qur'an and replaced with Sura 53, 19–23.

9 Oral interview with Shiroku Abudu, Nov. 26, 1990; Baa Shekogobi, Oct. 27, 1990; Worusika Kilisi, Nov. 10, 1990.

Information garnered from P. F. de Moraes Farias shows that Ki-Jibirin Kwandara (1916–1924) was the first Muslim ruler of Bussa Emirate. By converting to Islam in 1920, Kwandara incurred the anger of the Bussa people because he abandoned their traditional religious identity, which the Borgu had assumed for many years. As Moraes Farias put it, Kwandara broke “the compromise between Islam and traditional religion” (1992: 127f.). Ki-Toro Mahamman Gaani, who first ruled from 1903 to 1915, was not a Muslim, but during his exile in Ilorin in 1920 he converted to Islam. The conversion of some Wasangari rulers at this time did not mean a widespread acceptance of Islam by the Borgu people. Reporting in 1922, Hoskyns Abrahall (a colonial official) mentioned that “except for the Dandawa who were Muslims, and some Hausa merchants, the rest of the Borgu population were pagans (NNAK 1933b).

The influence of Islam was becoming apparent by the time Ki-Toro Gaani became king for his second term between 1924 and 1935. The resistance strategies had collapsed. For example, the Wasangari rulers changed the celebration of the Gani festival in order to coincide with the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad. This marked a significant triumph for Islam over traditionalism. It also marked the change of religious identity from an anti-Muslim attitude to one of Islamic acceptance.

Political Economy of the Wasangari

The indigenous communities of Borgu did not engage in commercial relations with their Yoruba or Hausa neighbors. As Richard and John Lander, explorers to Borgu in the first half of the nineteenth century, indicated:

Perhaps no two people in the universe residing so near each other, differ more widely in their habits and customs, and even in their natures, than the natives of Yariiba [Yoruba] and Borgoo [Borgu]. The former are perpetually engaged in trading with each other from town to town; the latter never quit their towns except in case of war, or when engaged in predatory excursions . . .¹⁰

Unlike the Wasangari who provided political leadership and identity, it was the Wangara who transformed Borgu's economy. Between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there was a substantial rise in demand for kola nuts in Hausaland. This development brought the Wangara merchants to the

economic frontline of Borgu because they served as the link between the kola nut producers in Gonja and the consumers in Hausaland. Establishing a diversified network of trade routes, the Wangara passed through many Borgu cities on their way from Gonja to Hausaland. In this case, they interacted with the Wasangari rulers to whom they paid tolls, tribute, and gave presents for providing political and military protection on their caravan routes.

Nikki became not only a political hub of power, but also a commercial center and its centrality to Borgu's economy manifested in the minting of a coin called the *mithqal* (Adamu 1975: 20), which became the acceptable currency in the complex trade network. A politico-economic relationship existed between the Wasangari and Wangara. In recognition of their political authority, the Wangara paid tribute and tolls to the Wasangari rulers who claimed that “the rich man and his wealth belonged to the king” (Alhaji Musa Mohammad, Nov. 27, 1985). In return, the Wasangari provided the Wangara with political and military protection along the trade routes. The Wasangari-Wangara relationship was mutual and relatively peaceful to the extent that some kings also participated in commerce in order to boost their economic status (Adekunle 1994a: 1–18).

Another dimension to the economic situation was the participation of Wasangari princes in banditry, especially in the early nineteenth century. In his article entitled “Princes as Highway Men,” Olayemi Akinwumi identified two Wasangari groups that were directly or indirectly involved in banditry. These were the “privileged” and the “less privileged.” While the privileged used their political power and position to control the economic resources of the land, the less privileged became warlords and organized the raiding of caravan merchants, thereby making the trade routes extremely unsafe (Akinwumi 2001). Ironically, the princes who were supposed to provide protection for the merchants also became organizers and leaders of banditry along the trade routes. The brigandage was not directed toward the agricultural or pastoral people but to the Wangara, Hausa, and Yoruba merchants who dominated the Borgu commercial network and economy. The purpose of waylaying the merchants was to divert the trade routes and in turn the profits therein to the emerging chiefdoms which the Nikki princes established and controlled. In this sense, the Wasangari princes engaged in banditry for political and economic underpinnings.

During his visit to Borgu between 1824 and 1827, Hugh Clapperton (1829: 67) referred to Borgu as a nation of robbers while Governor Bal-

10 Hallet (1965: 112). Idris also believed that Borgu people showed no interest in commerce (1975a).

lot of Dahomey called the Batonu people “incorrigible robbers” (Hirshfield 1979: 109). As late as 1894 during the “Race for Nikki,” Captain Lugard was informed of the banditry by the Borgu princes, which prevented traders from neighboring states from traversing the trade routes. Akinwumi mentioned how the Wasangari princes engaged in activities that “dented the image of [Borgu]” (2001: 333). Banditry has apparently given Borgu a negative identity. The aspect of banditry caused a strained relationship between the Wangara merchants and the Wasangari rulers who were unable to guarantee or provide security. Gradually, the Wangara lost control of the trade, Borgu’s economy witnessed a collapse, and the Wasangari lost economic power.

Diminishing Power of the Wasangari

By the second half of the nineteenth century, the power of the Wasangari began to decline due to some factors. First, the economy had collapsed because Hausa merchants had taken over control of the kola nut trade from the Wangara, whom the Wasangari heavily relied on for financial support. Second, the establishment of numerous chiefdoms brought about political fragmentation and competition for power and recognition. Nikki princes who established chiefdoms, especially in the southern part of Nigerian Borgu became autonomous of the mother kingdoms. Third, village administration was weak in the northern part, especially in Bussa, due to the loose political arrangement in which the Boko and Kamberi were left out of the administration. In the southern part, the political structure was stronger due to the considerable Yoruba population and influence. In both northern and southern Nigerian Borgu, however, the multiplication of hamlets and farm settlements undermined the political effectiveness of the larger towns (NNAK 1935a). Fourth, the coming of the Europeans wiped out the power and influence of the Wasangari.

The new imperialism of the late nineteenth century and the subsequent partition of Africa affected Borgu’s political organization and identity. As happened throughout Africa, the partition permanently polarized the Borgu people and altered their political identity. Although Borgu did not offer any particular economic attraction to the Europeans, its location on the River Niger apparently provided an opportunity for the British and French to maintain a balance of power in West Africa. The famous “Race for Nikki” in 1894 underscores the importance of Borgu to the two major colonial powers. Represent-

ing the Royal Niger Company (RNC), which had been granted a royal charter in 1886, Captain Lugard arrived in Borgu and signed a treaty with Lafia, the king of Nikki, on November 10, 1894. Captain Decoeur, the French representative, also signed a treaty with the king of Nikki on November 26, 1894 (Flint 1960: 225). The rivalry and competition for Borgu was eventually resolved without any military confrontation. In the Anglo-French Agreement of 1898, the British occupied the small portion in the western part of Nigeria’s middle belt (politically identified as Nigerian Borgu) while the French controlled the larger part now in the Republic of Benin (identified as French-speaking Borgu).

The takeover of Borgu by the Europeans diminished the political and economic powers of the Wasangari rulers. They were relegated, their formerly wide political powers were reduced, and they became subordinate to colonial officials. Their prestige also drastically decreased. Musa Idris expressed the feelings of the Borgu people about the European domination of Borgu by indicating that “the people of Borgu never forgave the British for the assault to the territorial integrity of the Bariba [Borgu] nation, a thing the Wasangari had defended with their blood since the founding of the Bariba states and had jealously preserved” (1975b: 310).

The European presence undermined the warrior tradition of the Borgu people in that they were never conquered, but the Wasangari were more affected by their loss of political power (Adegunle 2004: 239). The master-servant relationship between the colonial officials and the Wasangari rulers showed the extent to which the Wasangari rulers had fallen. A clear example of the way the British colonial official perceived some of the Wasangari rulers was recorded in a confidential report that states:

The Emir of Boussa [Bussa] is a weak and inefficient ruler unable to deal effectively with any new matter which he is called upon to carry out. In fact, putting anything in his hands simply means in many cases delay and constant reference to me before its completion . . . As for initiating on his own account any new policy of utility, he has probably never done such a thing. He is ignorant and has few ideas (NNAK 1911).

The emir referred to here was Sabukki during whose reign a revolt broke out in Bussa.¹¹ In his own case, the king of Yashikera was described as “a mere farmer and very poor and of no character” (NNAK 1911). The report was, however, differ-

11 For more information on the revolt, see Crowder (1973).

ent on the emir of Kaiama who was described as “distinctly intelligent and ready to further any new scheme which may from time to time be put before him for the development of his country, and this is all the more wonderful because he has not a strong staff of subordinates” (NNAK 1911).

The rise and fall of some Wasangari kings and chiefs during the colonial era partly dictated the pattern of politics in the postcolonial period. For example, the emirs of Bussa and Kaiama, who were paramount rulers under the British rule, continued to enjoy prestige and influence. While the chiefs of Agwarra, Babana, and Shagunnu recognized the superiority of the emir of Bussa, the chiefs of Ilesha, Kenu, Okuta, and Yashekira refused to accept the elevation of the emir of Kaiama over them, because he was considered to have assumed that position due to an “unmerited favor” from the British. In the contemporary political system of Nigerian Borgu, each chief claims to be autonomous and still clinches to land ownership and the power to distribute it. Like in other parts of Nigeria, Wasangari rulers must operate under state laws and regulations. There has been rivalry between the emirs of Bussa and Kaiama. Calved out of Bussa, the Kaiama Emirate is smaller in size, but the emir claims autonomy and equality with the emir of Bussa.

Conclusion

The role of the Wasangari in bequeathing political, military, and religious identity to Borgu has been tremendous. The politics of domination became an integral part of the Wasangari’s strategy to provide a multidimensional identity for Borgu. In the process, they enjoyed power and prestige through military might and were able to preserve and defend their warrior tradition. The political ingenuity of the Wasangari in establishing kingdoms and dynasties provided Borgu with a history and identity.

The Wasangari provided the historical connection and cohesion (through the Kisra legend), which was necessary for Borgu’s political identity. This cohesion also helped Borgu to maintain its autonomy at times from the Songhay Empire and from the Fulani jihadists. From every indication, the hallmark of cultural identity for the Borgu and for the Wasangari rulers was their systematic opposition to everything Islamic. In the nineteenth century, the Wasangari were able to revive their military proficiency and to withstand the onslaught of the Nupe and Yoruba who had once subjugated them. For their involvement and success in warfare, the Borgu people continue to be identified as military

geniuses, dreaded by their neighbors. In spite of the inability of the Wasangari to withstand the onslaught of the Europeans, they are still identified with military and magical power.

The political vicissitude that the Wasangari suffered in the wake of European colonization at the turn of the twentieth century was not peculiar to them; it was a general phenomenon throughout Africa. The policy of “divide and rule,” which the British adopted, produced interchiefdom rivalry in Nigerian Borgu. The recognition of the emir of Borgu and the emir of Kaiama as paramount rulers, led to further division and rivalry in Nigerian Borgu’s political system. In contemporary geopolitical division, Nigerian Borgu is now divided between Kwara and Niger states and the emir of Borgu, with his seat of power in New Bussa, appears to be the most recognized Wasangari ruler.

Abbreviations

ASR	Assistant Resident
BORGUDIST	Borgu District
BORGU DIV	Borgu Division
COU	Customs of Upper Borgu
DIV	Division
DOB	District of Borgu
EOB	Early History of Bussa
HIS	History
ILOPROF	Ilorin Province Files
NNAK	Nigerian National Archives, Kaduna
SNP	Secretary Northern Province
WAAN	<i>West African Archaeological Newsletter</i>

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Oral Interviews

Interviewed Persons	Location	Date	Interviewed Persons	Location	Date
Alhaji Musa Mohammad, Kigera III, (Emir of Borgu), c. 63 years	New Bussa	Nov. 27, 1985	Muhammad Omar Tukur, (Emir of Kaiama), c. 61 years		Nov. 24, 1990
Baa Shekogobi, (Mr.), c. 63 years	Okuta	Oct. 27, 1990	Shiroku Abudu, (Mr.), c. 86 years	Kenu	Nov. 26, 1990
			Worusika Kilisi, (Mr.), c. 61 years	Boriya	Nov. 10, 1990

