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Local Religion or Cult-Shopping?

A Sacrificial Site in Burkina Faso

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Abstract. – Dafra is a sacrificial site near Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Fasos's second-largest and predominantly Muslim city. Dafra has the reputation of being a powerful place where wishes made and confirmed by vows will be fulfilled. People come to Dafra because of illness, infertility, lack of money, failure in school or business, or nightmares. Although at first sight Dafra appears to be an archetypical African shrine, pilgrims are adherents to different religions and come from all over Burkina Faso, neighboring countries, and even from as far as Europe or the U.S.A. The example of Dafra shows that practices which appear to represent "traditional religion" are neither traditional nor homogeneous nor uncontroversial. *[Burkina Faso, local religion, Islam, shrine, cult shopping]*

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An Archaic African Shrine?

Imagine yourself in the West African Savannah in the month of February. The air is hot and dry. The arid landscape is covered with dust. You walk along bizarrely formed sandstones, and then descend a cliff down a narrow path into a gorge. Suddenly you are in a grove filled with shades; the air is cooler. When you reach the bottom of the gorge, there is a large pool of water. You see many people moving around. Some of them remove their shoes and walk in a line, carrying chickens to a boulder beside the pool where the chickens will be killed. Others pluck and roast chickens over a fire. The whole ground is covered with feathers and blood.

Here is how the archaeologist Timothy Insoll described the ritual activities at this place:

> Each participant is … told to communicate their desire to the god(s) silently whilst the chicken is in their hands. The chicken is then passed to the priest who plucks a single long feather from its wing and inserts it vertically into a mass of congealed blood which sits on top of the shrine. The chicken's throat is then cut by the priest, and the blood drained onto this feather. … The priest next questions … each of the participants as to what they will sacrifice here as an act of gratitude should their desires be fulfilled … (Insoll 2007: xiv).

This place and the rituals conducted there seem to be emblematic for stereotypical assumptions about the persistence of timeless "traditional religion" in Africa: there is an altar in a sacred grove; a priest acts as intermediary between cult members and gods; people sacrifice animals; certain taboos must be observed during the pilgrimage; and all this in a region that has been in touch with Islam for a very long time and the target of Christian missionary activities for more than a hundred years.

Quite contrary to the impression of having found an archetypical African shrine, my interviews with custodians and pilgrims at this site clearly revealed that those who guide visitors to the altar are no

priests; that visitors are not members of a local cult but come from all over Burkina Faso and the neighboring countries; that these visitors are Muslims, Christians, and adherents of local religions; that the killing of chickens is a recent innovation; and that there is no coherent cosmology or mythology connected with the place. In fact, there are dissenting opinions about its origins and about what should be the proper ritual conduct at the site. Above all, the discovery of the source on which the ritual activities are focused is attributed to a Muslim stranger. If this is not an ancient sanctuary of a traditional African religion, what is it then?

The place I describe here is Dafra,[1] a sacrificial site in western Burkina Faso, where people make offerings in order to achieve well-being. In terms of the classification outlined by Elizabeth Colson (1997), Dafra is a "place of power associated with nature spirits," as opposed to "land shrines dedicated to ancestral spirits" (Colson 1997: 47). Places of power are often seemingly "natural" phenomena, such as trees, groves, hills, or waterfalls, that may in fact have been altered through human activities, although they are not man-made in a narrow sense of the word. Colson stresses: "Sites accepted as having the potential to become places of power seem much the same throughout Africa, and indeed throughout the world. This is so much the case that few raise the question of why these and not others. Mountains, rock faces, caves, pools, waterfalls, rapids, hot springs, dense forests and large trees all seem to have the potential to engage the human imagination and become imbued with sacred authority" (Colson 1997: 49).

According to Colson (1997: 48), "most places of power … are likely to be known only to local people who come there for help when appeals at the regular land shrines have had no result. They are not places of distant pilgrimage," but some of them were (51). Clearly, Dafra is a place of distant pilgrimage. It is not the only place of power in this region but the only one with such a varied and international constituency.[2]

Dafra lies about eight km southeast of Bobo-Dioulasso. Bobo-Dioulasso is Burkina Faso's second-largest city and its population of an estimated half million is predominantly Muslim. In precolonial times, Muslims were a minority of traders, and conversion to Islam among the local populations only picked up during French colonial rule in the early twentieth century. However, adherence to a monotheistic religion in Burkina Faso generally does not correspond with sharply drawn confessional or social boundaries. Conversion to Islam or Christianity may occur more than once in a lifetime, and there are many multireligious families. Neither Muslims nor Christians are politically dominant.

Customs attributed to traditional religion, or "animism," are very much alive in the form of masking cults and shrines in the oldest quarters of Bobo-Dioulasso that are inhabited by communities that came to be known as Bobo and Zara (Bobo-Jula). Tourists are told to be careful when approaching the banks of the rivulet Houet which is inhabited by sacred catfish (siluridae). These catfish are the tutelary spirits and heraldic animals of Bobo-Dioulasso. Should anybody kill one of the fish intentionally or by accident, he or she will be flogged and must pay a fine to the elders of the respective quarters through which the Houet flows.[3] They will make a sacrifice in order to appease the powers embodied in those fish, and the dead fish will be buried the same way as a person would. The source of the Houet is at Dafra.

The "discovery" of the source at Dafra is attributed to a Muslim saint, the ancestor of a branch of the Kassamba-Diaby, today a kin group in Bobo-Dioulasso specialised in Islamic scholarship. Their ancestor is said to have been either on the way from Samatiguila (in present-day Ivory Coast) to Mecca or on the way back. He passed through the area during a drought. He found the source by praying and then looking around, or by following an animal. In one version, he prayed for water and lightning struck the earth, opening up the source.[4] In one version, he was a leper, and when he washed with the water, his hands became normal again. In yet another version, he saw that the fish carried gold, silver, and cowries, and thus knew about the power of the

1 Dafra was mentioned to me as an important place during the course of a research project on Islam and sacred places in and around Bobo-Dioulasso between 2006 and 2008 (Werthmann 2008, 2011). This article is based on three individual and five group interviews with village elders and cult attendants in Bobo-Dioulasso, and on 62 short interviews and conversations with visitors at Dafra, on the occasion of three visits in February 2007. Etymologies for Dafra vary: *dafira* (from arabic "water source;" from Bobo *duga o fre* "the prayer has been answered" – Traoré 1996: 332 f.), or Danfara, a personal name (interview with Mori Ouattara, 10. 03. 2008).

2 For a northern Ghanaian shrine with an international clientele see Allman and Parker (2005).

3 This and the fact that there are some masks which are thought to flog innocent passers-by are one of the reasons why many inhabitants of Bobo-Dioulasso who are not Bobo or Zara, never venture into the old quarters. Only tourists do this.

4 Traoré (1996: 332); Interview with Muhammad Kassamba-Diaby (04. 11. 2006); Interview with Souleymane "Doudou" Sanou (03. 03. 2007). A similar story is told about the springs at Sindou (interview with Bafaga Diané, Kotédougou, 17. 02. 2007). Traoré (1996: 333) says that the Kassamba-Diaby created gardens and orchards in the area by using slave labour.

place.[5] Therefore, the Kassamba-Diaby of Bobo-Dioulasso have a special relationship to the site of Dafra. Because of this special relationship, people who are not able to bring their offering of thanks to Dafra personally can send animals or an appropriate sum of money to the Kassamba-Diaby and they will take care of the offering.

However, there are also other inhabitants of Bobo-Dioulasso who claim to have a connection with Dafra. Four former villages, which are today quarters of Bobo-Dioulasso, claim to be responsible for Dafra in ritual matters, although they acknowledge the Kassamba-Diaby's special relation with Dafra. The inhabitants of Kwinima claim to have been the first settlers in the region[6] and, thus, have a ritual responsibility for the site of Dafra and the catfish in the Houet, just as the other ancient villages of Bindougoussou, Dioulassoba[7] and Tounouma that border the Houet[8] do. Therefore, members of these communities act as "cult attendants" (or "ritual collaborators" – Allman and Parker 2005: 44) for the visitors. This competition about ritual responsibility also has an economic dimension, as nowadays those who accompany pilgrims to Dafra make a living out of this activity.

Dafra is said to be a place where wishes made and confirmed by vows can be fulfilled.[9] One important wish is fertility, and children who have been conceived after a pilgrimage to Dafra are named after the site (e.g., Dafrassi). When a wish has been fulfilled, an offering of thanks has to be made in accordance with the vow. Another important reason for making a pilgrimage to Dafra is to conduct an expiatory sacrifice after having breached certain interdictions concerning Dafra or the Houet (Sanou 1996: 128).

Every visitor to Dafra has to bring a chicken or other offerings (millet balls, bread, milk) to Dafra. On arriving at the footpath that leads down into the ravine, the guide knocks on the trees bordering the path and announces the visitors to the spirits (in whatever language; Muslims may recite blessings in Arabic). As in Insoll's description quoted earlier, the pilgrims are then led to an altar where the chickens are killed. If the pilgrims are Muslims, however, they will not go to the shrine, but will kill their chicken directly on the ground beside the water pool. After the chickens have been killed, they are plucked and grilled on the spot on several fireplaces. Then the visitors proceed to the edge of the pool, throw pieces of fermented balls of millet paste and the intestines of the chicken into the water, and call: "*Dafra na tɔ!*" (Dafra, come and take!). Soon there will be a number of giant catfish who snap at the food. The cult attendants put the feathers and claws of the chickens onto the altar in order to confirm the wish made by the pilgrim. Some pilgrims, especially women, stick balls of shea butter (*karité*) on the altar or the wall behind it; after having washed in the spring, they remove the butter and rub it on their skin. Pilgrims who do not have the means to procure a chicken may simply take ashes from a fireplace and throw them onto the altar.

After having finished feeding the fish in the pool, the pilgrims follow a small footpath to the other side of some big rocks. There is another pool where they can feed the fish, and those who wish may wash in the water, which is considered to be purifying and healing. Pilgrims may take water home in bottles for drinking or washing, but it must not be boiled. They can eat the chickens directly, sharing out pieces to other visitors who came after them, or take them home. On Fridays, when most pilgrims arrive, the scene would resemble a picnic site with groups or families gathered around a meal were it not for the cadavers of a dozen or more goats and rams cut into large pieces, lying on their skins on the ground next to the pool. The whole ground is covered with feathers, and skins that were left behind hang in the branches of two or three trees to the side. The goats and rams are offerings of thanks made to Dafra in fulfillment of a vow made.

Certain taboos must be observed when visiting Dafra. One should not wear clothing of the colour red; one should not wear shoes when approaching the edge of the pool and the shrine; no blood must get into the water. Most people come accompanied by guides, either some of the cult attendants who wait for "clients" at the site, or relatives or friends

5 Traoré (1996: 332); interviews with village heads, cult attendants, and visitors at Dafra in 2007 and 2008.

6 According to Le Moal (1999: 21), Kwinima was a Bobo village where a Zara clan (Sanou-Daraso) settled. According to other versions, the settlers in Kwinima had received the land from the Tiefo, or Bobo and Tiefo had arrived together and then demarcated separate territories for settlement. According to Traoré (1996: 251), Bindougousso was created by traders from San (present-day Mali) who carried the patronymic Konaté.

7 Dioulassoba/Sya comprises the ancient villages of Kibidoué and Tiguihon (Sanou 2005: 61).

8 Interview with Sanou Famara and Sanou Mamadou (21.03. 2007); see also Sanou (1996: 96). Interestingly, the catfish are only sacred within the territories of these former villages; beyond the railway line and the abattoir, that mark the border to more recently settled parts of the town, the catfish may be caught and eaten without any sanctions. Other villages mentioned in relation with Dafra were Dogona, Kwa, Koro, Sagasiamasso.

9 One football team in Bobo-Dioulasso is named "Les Silures" after the sacred fish. Before playing at home, its members collectively visit Dafra and make offerings (Royer 2002: 475).

who have been there before. On the spot, every pilgrim is instructed and accompanied by one of the attendants while making the offerings. The attendants then pluck and roast the chicken or slaughter the other animals, and receive meat, millet beer, or cash in exchange.

The pilgrimage to and the sacrificial practices at Dafra appear archaic, but according to several accounts I collected, some changes apparently took place quite recently (that is, not longer than one or two generations ago). Formerly, pilgrims only went to Dafra on Mondays or Fridays. Before they went, they informed one of the village heads who was ritually responsible for the site and who would assign someone to accompany them. Pilgrims also killed a chicken at their own paternal lineage's ancestor shrine, first in order to determine whether the day was suitable or whether the visit should be postponed. People did not descend into the gorge individually, but assembled and then went as a group. They left their shoes at a certain spot before climbing down to the source. Pilgrims also did not leave individually. Those who accompanied pilgrims were not supposed to come back a second time on the same day with another pilgrim, because this invalidated the wish made by the first pilgrim. Neither were they entitled to ask for remuneration, although it was understood that their service should be compensated for in some form. The colour red was totally forbidden, even if a person carried only a very small item that was red. No blood and no millet beer were permitted in the water. Formerly only the non-Muslims made their vows and then washed with Dafra water, while the Muslims prayed at the site. Bobo farmers made offerings at the beginning and the end of the cultivation period.

In former times, Dafra could even serve as a bank. Cowries or money that were deposed as an offering of thanks at a certain spot could be taken by someone in need of it, but this person had to reimburse the money with interest a year later. Nowadays, money is no longer deposited because it will no longer be reimbursed.

Today, pilgrims go to Dafra on all days of the week, but Friday is still preferred. The visits continue from early morning to early afternoon; around 4 P.M. the stream of visitors ceases and vultures start descending to pick up the left-overs. Due to the constant coming and going, my assistant and I were not able to count people systematically, but just to give an impression: on February 9, 2007, a Friday, we conducted brief interviews with 78 people, some of whom arrived in small groups of three to six people (among them a group of tourists), some alone or with a guide. These 78 people were about half of the total number of people who visited that day. Most of the visitors came from Bobo-Dioulasso or some towns and villages in the region, such as Pala, Bare, Numudara, or Banfora, however, there were also people who came from Abengourou and Korhogo (Ivory Coast). Other Ivorian cities mentioned on other days were Abidjan, Bouaké, and Gagnoa. Among the visitors were Muslims, Christians, and "animists"; the ethnic affiliations mentioned were Bobo, Bobo-Jula, Dagara, Gouin, Jula, Lobi, Mossi, Nounouma, Peul, Samo, Senufo, Tiéfo, and Turka (most of them from western and southwestern Burkina Faso, except Mossi and Peul).

Although red is still forbidden, shirts with a somewhat reddish pattern may be admitted. Shoes are removed only a few meters before reaching the altar (otherwise they will be stolen). Self-appointed sacrifice attendants go to Dafra as often as possible and make money by accompaniying and instructing pilgrims. Some even pressure their clients for money, or keep the chickens and sell them in town. Others cut branches from trees that grow in the ravine and sell them, or they sell stones that they have brought from there.

The killing of chickens itself is a recent innovation. Only 25 years ago, Mahir Şaul (pers. comm.) was told by Bobo informants that a blood sacrifice in Dafra was an abomination. The proper sacrifice was a non-blood offering, such as fried cakes or balls made of millet. In fact, some say that the chickens killed at the altar today are not an offering but an oracle – depending on which side they fall, pilgrims know whether their wish has been heard or not. Even the place where the chickens are killed used to be further away from the water than the boulder that is used as an altar presently. Today, people wash knives in the water, so that blood gets into it. Although the practices of Muslims and non-Muslims at the site differ, there is unanimity concerning the necessity to make an offering of thanks after a wish has been fulfilled. Not only white cocks, goats, or sheep, but even cattle are offered by those who can afford it.

Changes in ritual practice are enumerated disapprovingly by the village heads, by members of the Kassamba-Diaby, and others. They clearly refer to a normative view of what is considered proper ritual conduct. As with other normative expectations it is possible that some of these rules were not always fully realised in practice. Still, even among the people who hold these normative views, there is dissent. The Kassamba-Diaby, who are Muslims, are especially opposed to the altar, which they do not approach, because for them it is a pagan shrine. Yet, although the Kassamba-Diaby are respected be-

cause of their special relationship with Dafra, they cannot impose rules or sanction improper behavior at the site. In contrast with shrines for ancestors or spirits that belong to individuals, kin groups, or villages, Dafra belongs to no one. This was stressed by almost everybody I talked to. Although the Kassamba-Diaby and some Bobo and Tiefo villages in the vicinity claim to have a special relationship with the site that entails certain ritual competences or responsibilities, no person, kin group, or village has the authority to enforce rules. The village heads say that Dafra will punish wrongdoers in its own time, which means that the person or one of his or her close relatives will drown or be killed by a wild animal (a bush spirit). It is probably the fear of this kind of punishment that keeps most visitors from breaking the rules of conduct at Dafra.

What probably began in the seventeenth or eighteenth century as a new cult centered on water and fertility has been transformed into a "sacrifice industry." Today, visitors to Dafra come from all over Burkina Faso and the neighbouring countries, even from as far as Europe or the U.S.A. They are Muslims, Christians, adherents of traditional religions and – last but not least – tourists. Their social backgrounds vary widely. On several visits, my interpreter Alimatou Konaté and I met people as diverse as a surgeon, a sociologist, businesswomen, farmers, students, etc. When asked what they actually knew about Dafra, most visitors said that Dafra is a place where you can go with any kind of problem, such as illness, infertility, lack of money, failure in school or business, need of a spouse, nightmares, etc. When misfortune has been caused by witchcraft, Dafra can help, but it is not possible to ask Dafra to harm others; if someone does so, the fish will not appear.

People who came to make offerings (*saraka*) there had heard about Dafra either because they were from Bobo-Dioulasso, or because some relatives or friends had already been there and a wish had been fulfilled. Some said that Dafra is a pagan place or shrine. Others, on the contrary, stressed that Dafra is a place for the worship of God. Others said that their ancestors already were in the habit of going there. These answers mirror the differences between people who claimed to be practicing Muslims and Christians who tended to declare Dafra as a part of local "tradition" that did not have anything to do with religion at all, and those who were either "non-practicing" Muslims and Christians, or outright proud to be "animists" or "fetishists" in popular burkinabè French parlance.

Obviously, there were some people who had tried other means of solving a serious problem before coming to Dafra as a last resort. Otherwise it would hardly be conceivable to leave a town in southern Ivory Coast and make an arduous and expensive journey of several days including the crossing of the UN-protected "zone of confidence" that separated the North and the South during the civil war from 2002 to 2007, just to get directly to Dafra and then back again. Cases like this also show clearly that the pilgrimage to Dafra is not in any way connected with a local "traditional religion": many people do not know more about Dafra than that it is a powerful place.

Collective Identities, Local Religion, and Islam

The introductory chapters to two recent edited interdisciplinary volumes about sacred groves and shrines in Africa respectively (Sheridan and Nyamweru 2008, Dawson 2009 [ed.]) acknowledge that both ethnic identities and ideas about sacred places are constantly changing, as anthropological research has proven on the basis of a multitude of case studies. However, the editors then go on to state that "African sacred groves typically serve as historical markers and sites for initiation, burial and sacrifice in societies based on horticulture and agriculture" (Sheridan 2008: 20); and "[t]he shrine is a representative of a connection with the land at the cosmological and supernatural level and, in terms of a community's or ethnic group's claim to cultivable territory, serves as a reminder to outsiders that this is – in very real terms – 'our land'" (Dawson 2009: vii). Such statements that focus on one particular group's relation to a land shrine or place of power seriously underrepresent transformations of collective identities as well as changes in ritual practice that may have taken place quite recently. How can we otherwise explain that Dafra, a place of power in western Burkina Faso with a polyethnic and even international constituency, is associated with a Muslim group whose members probably arrived in this region no earlier than the eighteenth century? In order to understand this, we need to have a closer look at the relation between "traditional" religion and Islam in West Africa.

The dispersion of Islam in West Africa was a concomitant of trade. For centuries, Muslim traders and craftsmen from the Mande-speaking regions slowly made their way along trade routes into remote areas. These Muslims settled down as "guests" of agrarian communities. Some adopted local religions over the course of several generations (Levtzion 1968: 143; Wilks 2000: 101); others settled in separate villages or town wards where they built mosques

and founded Quranic schools for their own and other people's children. For many centuries, converts to Islam were mainly traders or members of political elites. Conversion to Islam was not necessarily a one-way road. Depending on the historical and local circumstances, Muslim groups could become non-Muslims and then perhaps Muslims again over the centuries. Therefore, Mahir Şaul (2006: 8) suggested regarding Islam as a "major ingredient of West Africa's historical heritage" and as part and parcel of exchanges between West Africa, the Mediterranean, Europe, and the Middle East instead of assuming a dichotomy between Islam and non-Islam. Even where conversion did not take place, Islam has had a profound influence on West African cultures, just as Muslim communities were influenced by local religious traditions.

Three authors have recently remarked that, although the history of Islam in West Africa has been studied by historians for a long time, anthropologists have tended to focus on the non-Islamic, "traditional" elements of West African cultures (Amselle 1998, Launay 2006, Şaul 2006). All three authors refer to Marcel Griaule and his "school" as an example of the construction of African systems of thought and religious ideas as devoid of any outside influence, as, for instance, in their works about the Dogon and the Bambara of Mali. The French anthropologist Jean-Loup Amselle clearly follows a different line than the Griaule school. In his book "Logiques métisses" (Mestizo Logics), Amselle refutes the notion that there is such a thing as a traditional "Bambara religion," both on the grounds that "the Bambara" are in fact a colonial fabrication and that what the Griauliens and their colonial counterparts described as "Bambara religion" was rather "a collection of decentralized cultural practices" (Amselle 1998: 35) that were not restricted to one particular population. Amselle thus proposes to conceive of local religion as an "originary mixture" of "mythico-ritualistic practices" that includes Islamic elements because religion is by nature syncretistic.[10] According to him, there is no authentic, pagan, or pre-Islamic essence that can be extracted from present-day "Bambara religion," because the whole region is characterised by an oscillation between local religion and Islam.[11]

Examples of this oscillation are the religious traditions of the Bobo of Burkina Faso who inhabit the region in which Dafra lies. Through the seminal work of Guy Le Moal (1999), the Bobo have become famous for their masks and initiation cults and thus seem to be equally emblematic followers of traditional African religion as the Dogon of Mali. However, Mahir Şaul, who also did fieldwork among them, found that Bobo religion in fact contains several elements that are clearly Islamic imports. The Bobo language comprises a number of words from Arabic (that arrived in the region as loan words in the Jula language); certain altars show a remarkable similarity to the minarets of the typical West African mosques and some rituals contain elements that are obviously imitations of the Muslim prayer. The Bobo, however, are known to have resisted both Islamisation and Christianisation. Şaul puts forward the hypothesis that the appropriation of Islamic elements was in fact a way to get "inoculated" against Islam. By way of what he calls "mimetic appropriation" populations like the Bobo incorporated foreign cultural elements in order to construct "anti-Islams, built with the very elements of perceived Islam" (Şaul 2006: 26). I am not sure whether this was actually a conscious strategy or intention, but it seems plausible that local communities appropriated foreign ritual elements or objects for their cults whenever they considered them as sufficiently powerful, be they Islamic or anything else.

There are also examples of the adoption of local cultural elements by Muslims who had settled among farming communities. Robert Launay studied the example of the Jula communities in the area of Korhogo in northern Ivory Coast. Jula warriors had an initiation society with masks just like their pagan neighbours (Launay 1982: 55). Although the Jula religious scholars did not encourage participation in such masking cults, they certainly tolerated them. Moreover, Muslim groups that became non-Muslims guarded their ancestor's paraphernalia, such as Qurans, quills, or prayer mats, that were then integrated into shrines. The Zara of Bobo-Dioulasso are a case in point: when their Muslim ancestor made the pilgrimage to Mecca, legend has it, he entrusted his children to his Bobo hosts. During his long absence, the children gave up Islam and practiced the religious cults of their hosts. A Quran or a staff of their Muslim ancestor is said to be buried underneath a small shrine in the founding house of the Zara.[12] The Zara also have masking cults. The majority of the Zara remained non-Muslims until well into the colonial period.

Timothy Insoll describes a visit to Dafra in the prologue to his book "Archaeology, Ritual, Reli-

10 These expressions have been criticised because they imply "pure" essences prior to *métissage*.

11 See also Brenner (2000) for examples of the interplay of "Islamic religious culture" and local forms of religious practice.

12 Rey (1998: 143); Traoré (1984: 20f.; 1996: 199); Wilks (1968: 193).

gion" (2007: xiii–xv; see above). At the end of the book the example of Dafra is taken up again in order to support his argument that religion in archaeological thought should be accorded a more inclusive place than being just another element of life among others, such as technology, economy, or social organisation. Based on the example of Dafra, he points to various dimensions of religion, only some of which are retrievable through archaeological research:

1. visibility (the "natural" landscape and its alterations through human action);
2. definition (is the word "shrine" appropriate for the altar / stone pillar or sacred grove of Dafra?);
3. myth (narratives about origin);
4. ritual (including movement, noise, sensory alteration, emotional stimulation)[13];
5. time (completion of ritual action, notion of return, enduring sacrality);
6. syncretism/identity (non-exclusivity of participation);
7. belief/emotion/experience (belief in result and curiosity, accompanied by fear, awe, relief, happiness);
8. the numinous / the holy (atmosphere/significance).

Insoll concludes that "as an archaeological site stripped of the perspective of contemporary participation/observation … much of this would elude us" (2007: 150). He then demands: "We need to recognise the potentially embedded nature of religion as a key building block, if not sometimes *the* key building block of identity" (150).

At this point, we must ask: whose identity? Both Insoll (2007: xiii–xv; 147–151) and Sanou (1996: 128–135), who are yet the only academics to have written about Dafra, display a tendency to describe it as an archaic sacred place connected with one particular ethnic group – the Bobo – and its worldview. They neither mention Dafra's heterogeneous constituency nor the fact that ritual activities at Dafra have a clearly commercial dimension. As I have shown, Dafra does not "belong" to any one individual or community and the ritual practices at Dafra are not easily identifiable as part of a coherent "religion" of any one community. Obviously, not everyone shared the conviction brought forward by Şaul's informants that non-blood offerings at Dafra are an abomination. In fact, blood offerings are part and parcel of "traditional religions" of many agricultural societies (not only in Africa) that frame the exchange relationships between humans and the forces which guarantee their reproduction. People make sacrifices in exchange for fertility and well-being (Rivière 2003). This logic of exchange has been transferred to the site of Dafra and turned it into a veritable sacrifice industry.

Although Insoll is certainly right in arguing for a holistic approach that takes into account "the wider contextual associations of shrines plus houses plus funerary practices plus diet plus agricultural practices plus technology plus landscape alteration and perception and so on" (2007: 151), his aim "to reconstruct the whole package of the archaeology of Bobo religion" (151) is too narrowly focused on an assumed ethnic entity. Apart from the fact that Bobo, just as many other "ethnic" names in Africa, is an inclusive label for what were not at all bounded and homogeneous groups in precolonial times, "Bobo religion" is not homogeneous either. As Şaul (1997) has convincingly demonstrated, some crucial concepts of Bobo cosmology and ritual are clearly derived from Islamic influences. Bobo religion is "traditional" in the sense of sharing certain features with other religious traditions of agricultural populations throughout the region and beyond, such as the belief in earth deities and bush spirits, the importance of ancestors for maintaining communal life, and the possibility – or necessity – to establish exchange relations with these forces. In Dafra, the idea of exchange has been transformed into a quasi-commercial exchange: "Si tu offres beaucoup, tu gagnes beaucoup; si c'est petit, tu gagnes petit" (interview with Souleymane "Doudou" Sanou, Bobo-Dioulasso, 07. 03. 2007). Thus, instead of projecting ethnic entities and their assumed religious beliefs and practices into an irretrievable past, we should look for more appropriate ways of conceptualising the emergence and transformation of beliefs and practices.

Harmonious Disunity

Amselle, Launay, and Şaul agreed in stressing that Islam has been a powerful cultural influence in West Africa that shaped local religious practices even where there was no conversion to Islam and vice versa. Claims by local populations that certain powerful objects had originally come from Mecca, or that one's ancestors had been Muslim even if one's group is not currently Muslim, can be found all over West Africa. However, it is important to reconstruct the historical and political context of these processes of oscillation between Islam and local traditions

13 One may add spatial orientation/directionality. Movement in Dafra is always clockwise from left to right.

in order to understand just why references to Muslim ancestors become important in a particular moment or why Islam as a religion is rejected, while at the same time Islamic elements are incorporated into local religious forms. In order to do this, we need to go a little further into the history of the interested parties.

The city of Bobo-Dioulasso or Sya, as it was called in precolonial times, developed out of several villages along a trade route (Werthmann and Sanogo 2013). The dissenting as well as the shared opinions about the origins, responsibilities, and proper ritual conduct at Dafra mirror the history of settlement and the concomitant rivalries about economic resources as well as religious and political authority in the region. Although some current accounts about a "kingdom of Gwiriko" claim otherwise, the region around Bobo-Dioulasso does not seem to have been a clearly bounded and hierarchically organised polity before the arrival of the French in 1897 (Şaul 1998). As elsewhere in Africa, the region was rather characterised by spatial, social, and political mobility. Farmers, pastoralists, craft specialists, religious experts, hunters, warriors, and Muslim traders were not exclusive and immutable social groups or occupational categories, and kin groups or settlements were not fixed forever in one particular constellation or territory but were continuously faced with competition about resources and tendencies for fission. Social organisation tended to be segmentary, and there were – and are – particular ways of conflict regulation such as mediation through partners in joking relationships, for instance. Thus, the Kassamba-Diaby act as *maîtres de pardon* or mediators for the Zara in cases of conflict that these cannot settle among themselves, just as other kin groups specialised on particular crafts, such as blacksmiths, griots, or Muslim scholars act as mediators for other kin or ethnic groups.

In Bobo-Dioulasso, there were both alliances and conflicts between communities who claim to be firstcomers, such as the Bobo and Zara and their "guests," marriage partners and later rivals such as the Kassamba-Diaby or the Jula warriors and traders who came from Kong in present-day Ivory Coast. It seems that competing versions about the origin of Dafra only emerged during the past 30 years or so in the context of debates about firstcomership and political authority in Bobo-Dioulasso that have been triggered by the politics of decentralisation (cf. Hagberg 2006). As elsewhere in Africa, claims to national citizenship and/or to political leadership are increasingly backed up by references to indigeneity and autochthony (Geschiere and Jackson 2006).

One of the groups who claim to be founders of Bobo-Dioulasso and thus feel entitled to political leadership are the Zara.[14] The name Zara applies to kinship groups among the Bobo who claim an origin from "Mandé," specialised in trade and warfare, and were or became Muslims (Le Moal 1999: 17–25).[15] They first were allies to the Jula warriors from Kong who settled in the region since the eighteenth century and controlled the trade routes. Later, Zara and Jula became rivals about economic resources and political authority. The Zara's claim of firstcomership is contested by the Bobo who were mainly farmers in precolonial times. Many Bobo in Bobo-Dioulasso are Catholics today. They are opposed to Islam because it represents for them the religion both of the Jula warriors, who were politically dominant in the precolonial and early colonial period, and of the Zara, or more precisely, those among the Zara who converted to Islam during the colonial period after the French deposed the Jula *chef de canton* and nominated a Zara instead. In order to oppose the Zara's claim to firstcomership and political authority, many Bobo in fact cultivate a certain anti-Islam by promoting local traditions such as the masking cults. The Zara, however, also have masks, which is why other groups of Muslims in Bobo-Dioulasso, such as the Jula or Dafing, do not consider the Zara to be real Muslims but as *tubijon* or recent converts whose faith and religious knowledge is shallow.

The Kassamba-Diaby, a group that originates from present-day northern Ivory Coast and whose ancestor is said to have "discovered" Dafra, came to the region of Bobo-Dioulasso in the seventeenth or eighteenth century (Traoré 1996: 2; Roth 1996: 45 f.). They became assimilated to the Zara through intermarriage and through adopting their hosts' language. As "guests" they are hierarchically juniors of the Zara and owe them loyalty. In the late nineteenth century, however, there were misgivings between the Kassamba-Diaby and the Zara because the latter did not give up pagan practices, such as drinking beer and participation in masking cults. Therefore, a part of the Kassamba-Diaby emigrated to the settlement of Darsalamy, 15 km south of Bobo-Dioulasso. Darsalamy was founded around

14 For a discussion of "Bobo" as an ethnonym see Le Moal (1960).

15 For an attempt at reconstructing the history of the Zara, see Le Moal (1999: 17–25). Although Zara increasingly tends to be used as the name of an ethnic or even a single kin group in the city of Bobo-Dioulasso, Şaul (2013) points to the heterogeneous and contradictory genealogical and historical accounts that reflect multilayered processes of social and political organisation and emergent collective identities.

the mid-nineteenth century by Jula scholars from Bobo-Dioulasso who wanted to get away from such non-Muslim customs (Werthmann 2012).

Present-day narratives confirm the discovery of Dafra by the Kassamba-Diaby's ancestor. Attributing the discovery of Dafra to a group of "latecomers" in Bobo-Dioulasso may have been a way of avoiding open conflict. By acknowledging the Kassamba-Diaby's special relation with an important sanctuary that is associated with the city's tutelary spirits, the Bobo and Zara village heads, who claim responsibility for Dafra, circumvent debates about firstcomership and ritual custody among themselves, at the same time relegating the Kassamba-Diaby to a relatively unimportant position, because they rarely invite them to or inform them about rituals that concern Dafra or the Houet, arguing that as Muslims the Kassamba are not interested in these rituals. The dissenting opinions about the origins of Dafra as well as the shared conventions for rules of behaviour bear testimony both to the complementarity of different religious traditions in this region and to the collective effort of maintaining a harmonious disunity between different groups of settlers, which seems to be a prevalent pattern throughout the region.

This may also explain why one completely different version of the origin of Dafra comes from yet another community, the Tiefo, who claim to have been first settlers on much of the territory that is now Bobo-Dioulasso. The Tiefo earth priest of the village of Kwakwalé,[16] in the vicinity of Dafra, said it was the founder of Kwakwalé who followed the noise of a waterfall one Friday and thereby came to the site of Dafra where he encountered a man and a woman who were not human beings. He promised his daughter Danfara to them, and she was turned into a fish. Until today, only the Tiefo know the proper way of praying for rain at Dafra and of retrieving the corpses of dead fish or drowned persons from the water in order to bury them properly. Thus, the Tiefo claim a certain superior knowledge about rather than ownership of the shrine.

Cult Shopping

There is no way of establishing since when Dafra has been a pilgrimage or sacrificial site for the neighbouring populations. It has probably always been an important place in the spiritual topography of those who inhabited the region, and, like other populations elsewhere, entered a ritual relationship with the deities or spirits of the localities where they settled. It is quite conceivable that the site was used for rituals by different groups in former times, and that ritual practice changed countless times ever since the site first became known as a "place of power." The Kassamba-Diaby only arrived around the eighteenth century. It is unlikely that the local populations were not aware of the place until then. Asked about this, people answered either that their ancestors had in fact not gone there before, or that they had known the place but did not know about the efficacy of the water before the arrival of the Kassamba-Diaby's ancestor.

Today, rules of conduct are only weakly instituted because there are no 'priests' or religious specialists other than those village elders and cult attendants who claim that their communities have a special relationship with the place. There are conventions, but not laws, and there is only limited possibility for sanctions. Participation is inclusive; there is no predominance of any one ethnic group, religious denomination, age grade or other such qualities. In fact, there is dissent among the different custodians and clients of the site as to what constitutes proper ritual practice.

The example of Dafra shows that practices which appear to belong to "traditional religion" are neither traditional nor homogeneous nor uncontroversial. Today, the pilgrimage to Dafra is controversial even within one kin group, the Kassamba-Diaby. The Imam of the Kassamba-Diaby's mosque stopped visiting Dafra many years ago when he became Imam, but does not prevent other family members from going there. Other Muslims in Bobo-Dioulasso who consider themselves as orthodox and who would never go to Dafra argue that sacrificing chickens is a pagan practice and that if a Muslim does so, he is really a pagan. In fact, some Kassamba-Diaby have never gone to Dafra, but others accompany pilgrims quite regularly and make offerings themselves. They do not, however, tell everybody about this: when we came back from Dafra one day, a woman neighbour asked our Kassamba-Diaby guide where we had been, and he replied: "In Darsalamy!" (the Muslim village mentioned above).

Even in the context of western Burkina Faso, where shrines for earth deities, ancestors, or bush spirits are very important for personal and collective well-being (regardless of people's affiliation to the universal religions), Dafra is an exceptional place. It does not "belong" to any specific group or individual, although some Bobo and Tiéfo villages and

16 Interview with Mori Ouattara, 10. 03. 2008. Zara and Tiefo had military as well as matrimonial alliances in precolonial times. In the southwest of the Bobo settlement area, many Tiefo have assimilated to the Bobo (Le Moal 1999: 27).

the Kassamba-Diaby claim a special relation with it. Obviously, Dafra is not one of the shrines that "shape and define village, community, and ethnic boundaries" (Dawson 2009: vii); nor is it a "regional cult," because these tend to belong to one particular community or elite (Werbner 1977: Allman and Parker 2005).

In a way, ritual practices at Dafra have as much in common with "New Age" as with "traditional religion": people from heterogeneous social and religious backgrounds and with various desires and unequal economic means come to communicate with "those (usually) unseen spiritual entities and/or forces that they believe affect their lives" (Brenner 2000: 164). The main aim of current ritual practice at the site of Dafra is individual well-being. This is neither considered as a contradiction to the affiliation with Christianity or Islam nor does the pilgrimage transform the pilgrims into adherents of a local religion or initiates into a particular cult. For many clients, Dafra is one powerful place among others where they can seek a solution for their problems. The act of making offerings at Dafra is part of a shared religious tradition only insofar as it is one among several possibilities of asking for health and prosperity in exchange for offerings. In this sense I speak of "cult shopping"[17]: In order to obtain what they need, people can either pray to the Christian or Muslim God or make offerings to other forces, or both. Not everybody wants others to know that they actually do both, but many Christians and Muslims we met on several visits to Dafra quite openly and matter-of-factly stated that they had already been there at least once before. The term cult shopping, of course, does not do justice to the special atmosphere of a place like Dafra. Obviously, some places seem to be more suitable for communicating and exchanging with unseen forces than others.

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