RECONSTRUCTING SUBSISTENCE OF THE PROTO-DOGON

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The Issues I

- Dogon-speaking region of Mali is beginning to be well-known archaeologically.

- Although Dogon is famous to anthropologists, as well as controversial, it is little-known linguistically except for a single dialect.

- To explore the possible links with other tools for reconstructing prehistory, a convincing language survey was required.
A synthesis of existing unpublished data was made by Hochstetler (2004) which concluded there were at least 17 languages, but left queries over certain unsurveyed areas. A strategy was thus to take wordlists in all regions where doubts remained, concentrating particularly on items of subsistence and agricultural tools.
The Issues III

- Further outstanding problems were;
- The existence of a possible language isolate
- The diversity of Dogon and hence its likely time-depth
- The broader question of the classification of the Dogon family
Dogon lects
Niana
Uluban: Tebul Ure language
Walo: langue inconnue
Fieldwork

- Team was Roger Blench (MAESAO) and Denis Douyon (FLASH)
- Fieldwork, February-March 2005, likely return visit this November
- Main tool: list of ca. 600 words plus sociolinguistic questionnaire
Preliminary results I

- **New material on:**

- **The** Ana, Bunoge, Tebul Ure et Walo languages were recorded for the first time

- Also discovered was an unknown sign language for the deaf among the Tebul Ure (already an unknown language)

- All the raw data available on my website
Informants for Bangi Me at Niana
Informants at Pa
### Provisional lexical similarity percentages

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<th>Yanda-dom from Yanda</th>
<th>Bondum-dom (Kindyim) from Tintam</th>
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<td>Dogolu-dom from Sougoudonou</td>
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<td>Donno-sɔ from Bandiagara</td>
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<td>Ṭɔmɔɔ-sɔ from Ningari</td>
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<td>Ṭɔmɔɔ-sɔ from Piro</td>
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<td>Ṭɔmɔɔ-sɔ (Wazouba) from Kani-Goguna</td>
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<th>Ṭɔmɔɔ-sɔ from “Sangha de la mission”</th>
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<td>Tomo-kan from Ségue</td>
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Preliminary results I

- There are at least 21 distinct langues falling under the rubric Dogon
- The internal diversification of Dogon is approximately that of Mande
- Bangi Me is a language isolate
The diversity of Dogon is entirely in the west and north of its range; expansion onto the plains is thus quite recent.

Most curious is that the diversity is almost entirely lexical: all Dogon languages have virtually identical phonology, morphology and syntax.
Preliminary results 3

- Dogon languages do not closely resemble other Niger-Congo languages. Most particularly:
  - Word order
  - Absence of traces of noun-classes
  - Agreement between verb endings and pronouns

- Is it possible we have simply been wrong? That Dogon is not after all Niger-Congo?
Bangi Me is certainly not Dogon and perhaps not Niger-Congo. It may be a language isolate like Hadza, Jalaa, Laal etc. and a relic of Africa prior to the expansion of the great language phyla.

Interestingly, Bangi Me has its own vocabulary for agriculture, cereals and the like, suggesting that these are not residual foragers.
Results from reconstructions: livestock 1

- The only species reconstructible for Proto-Dogon is cattle.
- Goats, sheep and dogs appear to have come into the Dogon area from two directions.
- The source of pigs in the Dogon area is an interesting question: they do not appear to have borrowed names.
The name of the horse (#som-) is widespread in Dogon, but cognate with other savannah languages and probably reflects the early transmission of the pony across the Sahara.

Names for donkey show great diversity and are borrowed from Songhai, Mande and Gur. Donkeys are probably quite recent in this region.

Chickens have two distinct names suggesting they came into the region from different directions.
The three cereals grown by the proto-Dogon were almost certainly fonio, bulrush millet and sorghum. The names of millet and sorghum have a tendency to interchange but we can tentatively put forward #emba for sorghum and #yuu for millet. Fonio is #pongo which is similar to most surrounding languages.

The PD grew at least two pulses, cowpea (#nuuŋe) and Bambara nut (#εεεε) and perhaps Kersting’s groundnut.
Results from reconstructions: crops 2

- Evidence for other crops is limited by the fact that there is only my survey data. However, the case for tiger nuts (*Cyperus esculentus*) and garden eggs (*Solanum* spp.) is reasonable.

- It is clear the PD did *not* have okra or roselle or any types of tubers.
Reconstructions of tree names suffer from inadequate data but it is likely the PD exploited the baobab, fan-palm, shea and locust trees, to judge by reconstructible forms.
Results from reconstructions: iron

○ Dogon vocabulary for blacksmiths’ iron tools, forge parts etc. seems to come from three distinct directions onto the Plateau, from Songhai, Mande and Gur
Conclusions

The Dogon cluster has been established in the region > 3000 years to account for its diversity.

However, agriculture and cattle-keeping were clearly part of the culture of the PD, so its diversification must be post about 3500 BP.

There were other agricultural peoples in the region prior to the Dogon expansion, of which Bangi Me is the last trace.
Conclusions

But, rather puzzlingly, we do not yet have any convincing archaeological correlate of the Dogon expansion.