

**Programme Point Sud 2009-2010**

**Urban Identity and Belonging in West Africa:  
Bobo-Dioulasso in the Regional Context**

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**Point Sud, Bamako, Mali**

**Report**

## **Urban Identity and Belonging in West Africa: Bobo-Dioulasso in the Regional Context**

### **Organisers**

PD Dr. Katja Werthmann (Ethnology), Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz

### **Themes and Objectives**

The city of Bobo-Dioulasso (Burkina Faso) served the participants of the workshop as an example for discussing issues of historical and contemporary transformations of collective identity, political participation and intergenerational relations in urban Africa. Although several studies from different disciplines exist on Bobo-Dioulasso, a synthesis of the results has been lacking. The conference thus gave scholars who have worked at different times and on different issues in Bobo-Dioulasso, the opportunity to get to know each other and their research based on certain key questions.<sup>1</sup>

Bobo-Dioulasso is today a city of 500.000 inhabitants, which, due to its industrial infrastructure, is considered Burkina Faso's "economic capital". As in other cities, however, the income distribution is very broad and much of the population is employed in the so-called informal sector (Labazée, Roth). The prevailing public opinion that Bobo-Dioulasso is being "neglected" by the political elite in the capital of Ouagadougou is not entirely consistent with the fact that on the one hand, the ruling party is also in power in Bobo-Dioulasso, and that on the other, differences and conflicts exist even within this party that influence local politics (Hagberg).

As elsewhere, many current differences and conflicts over political power and authority have their roots in the colonial period. The formation of contemporary ethnic identities is a consequence of colonial policy that privileged certain groups and disadvantaged others. The pre-colonial rivalry between socio-professional categories (farmers, traders, warriors, Koran scholars) evolved during the colonial period into a rivalry for resources of identification, such as the claim to indigenesness. Today, two groups (Bobo and Bobo-Jula/Zara), which increasingly define themselves as distinct ethnic groups, claim to be the founders of Bobo Dioulasso. They reject vehemently the local political aspirations of other groups, such as the former warlords, who for a time were political power holders under French colonial rule (Cissé, Sanogo, Sanon, A. Sanou, B. Sanou, Saul). The processes of differentiation between these populations since the colonial period is articulated in, among other things, different religious affiliations (local religions, Christianity, Islam) and along political lines within and outside of formal political parties (Debevec, Fourchard, Traoré). Like in other cities in Africa, recent democratisation and decentralisation processes as promoted by international organisations have the paradoxical effect that political differences are become more clear and in particular that the ideal of "autochthony" is increasing in importance, which in Bobo-Dioulasso culminated in open violence and two deaths during the mayoral elections of 2001 (Hagberg).

### **Methodology and Results**

The conference was attended by a total of 21 participants (including three PhD students from Point Sud). The conference language was French. The researchers came from a variety of disciplines (anthropology, history, linguistics, sciences, and economics) and countries (Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, Mali, France, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland, Slovenia, USA).

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<sup>1</sup> In the following the names of the respective speakers will be provided in brackets.

Also present were representatives of the mayor of Bamako and Bobo-Dioulasso. The two cities maintain a city partnership.

It was interesting to observe how the differences between different population groups were presented in the papers by researchers who identify explicitly with them. The above mentioned lines of conflict thus became visible during the conference itself. The Point Sud Research Centre offered a neutral territory on which these differences could be discussed without becoming openly conflictual. At the same time it also became clear that the conditions and problems of urban life in Africa are of a general nature. The precariousness of basic services and employment, the differentiation of lifestyles, the changes in gender roles or the reversal of the generation contract (Banhero, Debevec, Roth) are not specific to Bobo-Dioulasso but can be observed in a similar form in many African cities.

### **Sustainability of Results**

The papers will be published in a revised form as a book.

### **Participants (Researchers)**

1. Dr. Yacouba Banhero Political Science, University of Ouagadougou
2. Dr. Chikouna Cissé History, University of Abidjan
3. Dr. Liza Debevec Ethnology, University of Ljubljana
4. Dr. Laurent Fourchard History, CEAN Bordeaux
5. Dr. Sten Hagberg Ethnology, University of Uppsala
6. Dr. Ludovic Kibora History, University of Ouagadougou
7. Dr. Pascal Labazée Socioeconomics, IRD Mexico
8. Dr. Claudia Roth Ethnology, Kultur- und Sozialanthropologisches Seminar, Lucerne
9. Dr. Lamine Sanogo Linguistics, Technical Advisor, Cabinet of the Minister, Delegate concerned with Alphabetization and Education, Ouagadougou
10. Adolphe Sanon Koudougou
11. Dr. Alain Sanou Linguistics, University of Ouagadougou
12. Dr. Bruno Sanou History, Centre Africain de Recherche pour une Pratique Culturelle du Développement, Bobo-Dioulasso
13. Prof. Mahir Şaul Ethnology, University of Illinois, Urbana
14. Dr. Bakary Traoré History, CNRST, Ouagadougou
15. PD Dr. Katja Werthmann Ethnology, Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz