Bondjo ethnicity and colonial imagination

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Abstract

Colonial ethnography of the Ubangi River basin, itself both the product and tool of White occupation of the territory in the last two decades of the 19th century, created a false ethnicity. The so-called Bondjos arose from ethnological bric-a-brac and animative imagination, becoming a powerful myth that lasted briefly, illustrating the role of racial stereotyping in the colonial enterprise.

Introduction

The ideology of colonization in central Africa contained two contradictory theses: that the natives were savages but that they could be civilized to a certain degree. As could be expected, all discussion among Whites was constrained by these two beliefs, although the immediate circumstances and topics of discussion brought one or the other to the fore.

One of the consequences of this ideology was the creation of two 'tribes' or 'races' (depending on the writer) in the ad hoc ethnology done by Whites at the time of the occupation of the territory in the Ubangi-Congo (Zaire) River basins in the last few years of the 19th century. (For the most part names from the last century are used to maintain the perspective of the 'historical present.') The so-called Bangalas represented the educable Negro who could become the Belgian ally in the exploitation of the Independent State of the Congo (otherwise known as the Congo Free State). The Bondjos, on the other hand, represented the ferocious cannibal whose evil ways had to be eliminated one way or another.

This study deals with the Bondjos, whose existence from a historical point of view can be considered to have been imaginary, fictive, or even mythical, and so it will be argued. They played a role in the drama of colonization for only about twenty years, that is, from the time the first White explorers went up the Ubangi River until occupation of the territory was firmly established. This covers the last fifteen or so years of the 1800s; the name, however, as a purely descriptive and administrative designation, has persisted to this day, as will be seen below.

Bondjo ethnicity is seen as an artifact of French colonial ideology, rising partly from ethnographic 'fact' (rightly or wrongly perceived) and partly from the relationship between the French and local populations, which was itself built on earlier contacts. Although reports about these peoples (and the Bondjos in particular) were contradictory in many ways, suggesting the need the Whites should have seen to revise and correct ethnographic

descriptions, the myth persisted until it was no longer needed.

The argument needs to be justified with respect to three particulars. First, the purpose of including contradictory observations is to demonstrate in a detailed way the very nature of colonial ethnography, the value of which should be to make researchers in this area especially cautious and critical of their sources. Second, these sources are not themselves evaluated for their relative veracity, as two of my French colleagues suggested they ought to be, indicting a couple of the writers cited in this work. While recognizing that some are less trustworthy than others on the whole, it would be an altogether different enterprise to establish a qualitatively graded bibliography. Besides, it would be a highly debatable one. But the decisive argument against such an undertaking is that when it comes to narrative in human experience, no one is ever wrong in everything—as criminologists recognize fully. The historian's task is therefore to find the truth in the midst of all that is not true. It would, moreover, be extremely hazardous for historiography to be less critical of the trusted source than of the doubted one. Everyone errs. Sometimes a single, small error is crucial for a specific historical task. Finally, the use of the concept of myth is in its sociological sense. If it is too strong for the present analysis—although I would argue against that—it does nonetheless suggest the existence of a frame-of-reference or a perspective that is integrative and explanatory, different in nature from a simple, ad hoc 'description.' The concept is used to suggest the nature of colonialist ideology.

I. Name

The earliest published references to Bondjos, excepting maps, which will be treated separately, seem to be those of Brousseau (1886), Froment (1889), Musy (1891), and Hanssens (1892). The first, not available to me, is cited by Coquery-Vidrovitch (1969, 323). Musy's record is evidence that the Bondjos' reputation was already established. But it was Dolisie, among the French, who had first made contact with them. His trip was in 1885, when, in the month of May, he reached a point somewhere between 2-3° N (Flament 1952, map II/1, giving the dates of all the earliest excursions up the Ubangi River). That latitude coincides with the location attributed to Bondjos by others, as we shall see. But it was two years later, in November 1887, that Dolisie reached the rapids at Bangui; and it was on this expedition that he had his disagreeable encounter with the people of Modzaka, which is a fifteen-day canoe trip from the confluence of the Congo and Ubangi Rivers (Veistroffer [1933], 34, where Modzaka is described as a "group of villages."¹ These were the Bondjos—wrote Veistroffer (1931, 144), who was 'chef de poste' of Modzaka on 1 January 1889—"les plus féroces cannibales de la contrée." This attack, as it was called, took place on 29 July 1887 (Kalck 1970, 2:346). The last (Hanssens 1892) is surely the most important, because it records the earliest notation (or inscription) of the name. In this publication Hanssens describes, not merely in retrospect but on the cited dates, his exploration of the area and the treaties he had made. Thus, on 25 April 1884 he reported that the discovered affluent of the Congo River is called Mbundju at the confluence (1892, 38; spelled Mbumdju on page 46, very likely a typographical error.² It is undoubtedly Hanssens' report (if it was not that of Grenfell) that led to the Ubangi's being called Mboundgou in the ING map of 1884. (The use of the digraph 'dg' may have been a deliberate attempt to represent the affricate represented here as 'dj' on the pattern, for example, of 'edge'.)

The etymology of Bondjo (also spelled Bondjio, among others) as a name is so problematic, as with most ethnic names in central Africa, that we cannot expect too much help from

linguistics in tracing the history of the people themselves. Nonetheless, the following must be noted.

Whatever its source, it must be the same word as Bruehl's Bandjo (1911, 15,16), for the area is correct. In his ethnography of the Sanga River region he says that the word refers to a certain kind of building: "Autrefois (même en 1898) ces 'Bandjo' étaient des corps de garde, solidement construits avec de gros pieux jointifs, mais percés de meurtrières. ... Actuellement les 'Bandjo' ne sont plus que des clubs pour hommes. C'est là que ceux-ci se réunissent pour causer, manger, fumer, et faire quelques menus travaux." Fortified buildings perched on the high banks of the Ubangi were noted by several of the early travellers. P. Allaire wrote that all Bondjo villages were fortified with a palissade (in Galinand n.d.:54); also Moreau (1911:110.)

The preferred etymology among Whites was one that equated Bondjo with the word for 'white' in the contact language of the Ubangi basin, namely, Sango. Huot says (1902, 302) that the Bondjos applied the word to themselves, because their skin color was a "teint clair, légèrement cuivré" and that the word came from "la langue de la rivière." Since there were many riverine languages, he must have been referring to the one used as a lingua franca. This is made clear in an administrative report concerning the populations of the Ubangi, where Monier says that 'Bondjo' comes from the Sango language, "dialecte courant de la rivière" (ANX.4(3)D9, 22 November 1902). P. Calloc'h attributes (1911, 3) the word to what he calls the Mondjombo-Gbanziri language, "nom dont ils durent qualifier les premiers européens qui parurent chez eux." Folk etymologies dating from that period persist: It was given to me as a fact recently that the word originated in the confusion of the French Bonjour, "Les Français disant 'Bonjour,' les Africains répétant ce salut, et chacun pensant que c'est le nom de l'autre: 'Bonjo' et 'Bonjou'." Such etymologies should be rejected on linguistic and sociolinguistic grounds. First, the ethnic name rarely is cited with 'u' (French 'ou') in the final syllable, which surely would have persisted if it came from either the word for white or

from the greeting. Second, there is absolutely no record of the French having greeted the natives with Bonjour, and I doubt very much that they would have used it. It is certain that on the Congo River a Swahili expression was used. Trivier (1891, 81) gives malamu as the one that was used from Stanley Pool to the Falls, mbolo being used in the Gabon and mbote from Loango to Ludima. Having these, they would not have introduced a French one. Third, the word for a European in Sango is mbûnzú, never with any other vowel.

The explanation of the origin of Bondjo does not lie in any ad hoc folk etymology. It lies instead in the history of its movement from south to north, whatever its ancient linguistic source may have been. The following section should make this clear.

II. Location

Because Bondjo history is linked to that of Whites, the latter left onomastic traces of the Bondjo as they penetrated up the Ubangi River. The first White to arrive in the mixed waters of the Ubangi and the Congo was of course Henry M. Stanley, but it was in the early 1800s that the area really began to be explored. As far as the Ubangi is concerned, Hanssens and Alphonse Van Gèle (or Vangele) were the first to penetrate its course, reaching a point between 0-1° N in April 1884, followed in October of the same year by George Grenfell, the English Baptist missionary. But there is much disagreement among writers as to who was first.

In any case, the Englishman was the first to reach the rapids just north of latitude 4° at what came to be Zongo in February 1885, followed by Van Gèle in October of that year.

Grenfell's contribution is the village of Mbonjo on the right bank of the Ubangi, south of Boyeka and immediately below 1° N (Map: RGS 1886). This is found, with an interrogation mark, in Courty's map of 1897-1898, below the villages of Mopambo, Mopenzele, Okenga, and Bolonga (proceeding from south to north). Here also (Feuille 6) we find a Monbonzo just above 4° N on the left bank, with the initials V.G., undoubtedly those of Van Gèle, because in his map of 10

December 1886 (in Cuypers 1960) we find Mon Bonzo above the Lobay River and the village of Mou Toumbi, on the left bank. But in that same map there is Bonzo on the right bank, below the Lobay! Other spellings occur, such as Mombonzo and Mombonjo.

This southern imprint must be considered along with some other names. Bonso, for one, is given as one of the names of the Ubangi River (Johnston 1908, 1:133, possibly relying on Grenfell). On the other hand, this river is named Mbundgu (Mboundgou) in the ING map of 1884.

In all of this area Bantu languages are spoken. Yet in the last century the name Bondjo was not limited to these. The people around the bend of the Ubangi certainly speak no Bantu language, but entirely different ones belonging to the Ubangian branch of Adamawa-Eastern (outlined in Samarin 1971). It is characteristic of accounts of exploration in this area that there are virtually no statements about the languages, only that interpreters were used in the Lower Ubangi (Froment, Hanssens, and Galinand). These were presumably 'Bangalas,' who would have found people speaking closely or somewhat closely related languages or dialects.

Whenever the Bondjos are located with respect to other ethnic groups, they are generally upriver from both the Bobangis (Bubangis) and the Balois (Balohis). (It is commonly held that Loi (or Loyi) is the proper, that is, indigenous, name for the river that came to be known, as it is today, as the Ngiri.) P. Rémy says that the Balois and Bondjos are two "peuplades" who share the Ubangi up to the first (known as the Elephant) rapids, that is, around Zinga (CSEP; also Bruel [1907]). Maistre groups these two populations by saying (1895, 25) that the Bondjos are in three "fractions," the Baloi in the south, the Bondjo "proprement dits au centre par 3° de latitude environ" and the Buzeru (Bouzérrou) who are located as far as Bangui.

P. Goblet is one who places the Bondjos south of the Baloi, for, writing about a trip from

Liranga, he says (CSEP, Easter 1895; also Goblet 1932, 118ff), on coming to the fourth village upriver, "nous approchons des Bondjos," followed immediately by "Nous devons être dans la tribu des Baloi."⁴ Today the Baloi are recognized as people inhabiting the lower Ngiri River, i.e. at its confluence with the Ubangi (e.g. in the map of Born 1975). Their identity and classification in the 19th century are, of course, problematic. Nonetheless, they were for some reason differentiated from the Bondjos. In any case, we should note that Brunache (1894, 49,51) ² placed the Baloi at the villages of Youmba, Ngourou, and Nghiri (the latter apparently being confused with the river). Brunache's Youmba is undoubtedly Van Gèle's Lyumba, on the right bank of the Ubangi below his Mou Joka at 0-1° N.

Froment (1889) is explicit in locating the Bondjos upriver of Mobendjellé (undoubtedly the same as Mopenzele cited above and Mobenzélé of Darré 1923). He gives the names of the four principal Bondjo villages: Mankania, Moyaka (probably the same as Mou Joka), Monga, Liboko (a name found elsewhere in this vast west-central Bantu area), and Bobôlon.⁵ These are south of Impfondo, which he does not cite as a specifically Bondjo habitation. Brunache, in the place just cited, does: At Impembo (which I take to be Impfondo) "nous voyons les premiers 'Bondjios'." (He generally puts ethnic names in quotation marks.) Challaye (1909, 60) also considered this village a Bondjo one.

But it is with the name Modzaka that the lower-Ubangi Bondjos are most frequently associated.⁶ Even Brunache, on the very page already cited, says, "C'est à Mozzakka [probably the same as Modzaka and not Mossaka] que l'on peut fixer la limite sud de cette tribu." Musy (1891, from diary entry of 6 September 1889) also locates Bondjos at this village. Dybowksi must have been talking about the same place when he said (1893, 152) that the Baloi end and the Bondjos begin at Moyeka or Boyaka, which d'Uzès (1894, 136) called Boyéka.

We locate this Modzaka with some difficulty. Van Gèle's map already cited has a Mou Joka just below 1° N. Other maps have a Bayeka or Majoka in this area, which must be Bruel's

Moyacas (ASOM, 31 May 1896). There is no difficulty in identifying Modzaka with Moyaka orthographically, because it is quite clear from a comparative study of place and ethnic names recorded by Europeans for this area in the last part of the 19th century that 'z,' 'dz,' 'j,' and 'y' were interchangeable. Some of this variation may be accounted for by copying-errors, as the Whites took down information from each other, but some of it is to be accounted for by the 'accent' of those Blacks who were in the service of the Whites.⁷ Note that in Van Gèle's map, at about 3°5' N, below the mouth of the Lobay River, is located an ethnic group called Mon Yembo, split as two words perhaps only because the name straddles the river; in Bruel (1907) one finds Mondjembo. This must certainly be the people later, and still, identified by d'Uzès (1894, 143) as the Mondjombo and the Bondjo village of Madjembo. And the ethnic names Banyembe and Bolongo located immediately north and south of the confluence of the Ibenga River (Map: CI 1893, 4) must be the same as this Mon Yembo and Bruel's Boundongo and Bondungo of other writers. The latter is to be identified with Van Gèle's village name Mondongo on the left bank of the Ubangi between 2-3° N. Other names for the Ibenga are Mokala and Motaba (as in Bruel (1907)).

The other location of Modzaka is a northerly one, just a bit upriver from Impfondo and fifteen days by canoe upriver from the Ubangi confluence. This is where Dolisie's party was attacked by Bondjos ("anthropophages invétérés") and he got a spear wound in the thigh.⁸ Bruel identifies Modzaka with Mondjembo/Modzembo and locates it "sur la rivière Ebenga (la Motaba)," but on a map shows ((1907)) Modzaka actually below the mouth of this river. This village has been identified with that of Bétou, who was named as a Bondjo chief by P. Pédrón.⁹ In 1888, according to Bruel ((1907)), Bétou's village was on the left bank, about 3°12" [sic] N, approximating the location already cited. Another Bondjo chief in this area is identified as Imescé by Veistroffer (1931, 156), whose village is located on Van Gèle's map as Imesa just north of 2° latitude.

Other locations for the Bondjo on the southward-flowing Ubangi are Zinda (possibly meaning Zinga), 36 hours by steamer from Bangui (Mangin 1936, 81, quoting a letter dated 15 February 1897), Doundou, south of Zinka, presumably Zinga (Castellani [1897], 223), and the "grande agglomération" of Ngombe (Veistroffer 1931, 158, writing of January-August 1889).

We see then that although the population in the 500-km stretch of territory between the Ubangi confluence and the Zongo rapids at Bangui, known at the time both as Moyen and Bas-Ubangi, had not been well described by 1896—because "les voyageurs n'ont fait que passer très rapidement pour pouvoir les étudier" (BC 2(19):224)—the Bondjos were quite definitely located by the Whites just north and south of the Ibenga River.

Attestations for the Bondjos in the Bangui area will come from the literature to be cited in the discussion that follows. Here we only need to note that Carlier (1899) considered the Boboyas (between Bangui and the Ombella River) and the Butus (between the Ombella and the Kemo) as Bondjo tribes. In 1895 Ditte (ANX, 10 March 1895) located Bondjos between Bangui and Ouadda.

It is difficult to understand how the population of such an extensive area could have been identified so categorically by individuals of this exploratory period. Quite a large number of contacts with the riverine peoples had been made and the Whites had had opportunity to discuss their observations amongst themselves. One's puzzlement is increased when these are analyzed, as will now be done.

III. Physical characteristics

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It was the physical stature of these people that seemed to set them off from others known by the Whites. "Erusquement," writes Brunache (1894, 52), "sans préparation aucune, après avoir quitté [in the south] une population à l'aspect presque grêle, on se trouve en présence de véritables colosses." Again and again similar words are used: "ce sont tous des hercules" ?

(Musy 1891, writing of September 1889).¹⁰ So we see that although the Upper and Lower Ubangi Bondjos were considered to be of the same "race," they differed at least in stature. This is not to say, however, that other people were not recognized for their tall stature. Brunache says (1894:80) of the Langwasis (a Banda-speaking people at the mouth of the Kemo River upriver of Bangui), never included among the Bondjos, that they were tall and svelt.

Other observations were made about the physical appearance of the Bondjos, but because they do not figure prominently in the characterizations and did not appear to be criterial for the identification of the Bondjos, we can ignore them. These are skin color, which was said to be, for example, a "beau bronze" (Challaye 1909, 60; also Castellani [1897], 223); presence of a sixth digit on hands and feet (Brunache 1894, 53); and two or four incisors removed (Brunache 1894, 52; d'Uzès 1894, 137; Veistroffer 1931, 156).

It is difficult to reconcile the above complimentary remarks with the negative ones. Thus, on the one hand, we have statements like these: The Botabas Bondjos are "les plus beaux hommes de la rivière" (Musy 1891, 292) and are "un des plus beaux spécimens de la race nègre que nous ayons rencontré" (Brunache 1894, 52). On the other hand, of those very Bondjos whose stature was admired, it is said that their "extrême prognathisme les rend extrêmement laids" (CF 2:26); "La tête est bestiale: traits accentués, front fuyant, mâchoire proéminente" (Challaye 1909, 60); see also Veistroffer 1931, 156; Froment 1889, 203; Baratier [1897], 11.

The Bondjos of the Lower Ubangi are admired for their art as well as their stature and physical appearance. Metal work was frequently observed and described by the explorers but not so frequently admired. One exception is Brunache's comments (1894, 59) on toilet articles such as "spatules, raclettes, pinces, rasoirs": "Tous ces menus objets, qui sont d'un goût parfait, sont fabriqués par les 'Ngombés,' petite fraction de la tribu des 'Bondjos,' dont la réputation comme forgerons est établie dans tout l'Oubangui."¹¹ For other such comments see CSEP, 3:122-123 (for 1895) and BC, 2(12):139 (for 1896).

What is obvious, in spite of the difficulty just mentioned, is that the farther upriver one goes the more severe becomes the denigration of the Bondjos. This fact is of capital importance in the writing of their history. Of the people of Yakuli (Ya-Kouli) very near Bangui Ponel observes (ANP, Bangui, 12 May 1890) that they are "les plus hideux nègres que l'on puisse voir." These same villagers are described by Gaillard (ANP, 31 October 1891) as being of an inferior race, as is obvious from the shape of their skull. The Bondjos were "au dernier degré de l'échelle humaine; ce sont les hyènes de l'humanité," wrote Mgr. Augouard (CSEF, 11 January 1894); again he said that they were a "race décrépète, déchue, destinée à disparaître à brève échéance" (25 December 1894, in AA 10(37):20).

These statements should be sufficient in themselves to convey the disgust with which the Bondjos in the area around the elbow of the Ubangi were held. The impression would be stronger if they were compared with other upriver peoples, like the Gbanziri and Sango. Of these (treated in Samarin 1982b) there was almost nothing but praise. For example, Huot (1902, 304) wrote that the Gbanziri have a "caractère communicatif et enjoué" as compared with "ces affreux Bondjos, sombres, rébarbatifs et méfiants." Maistre, who was in the area early in the last decade, described (1895, 30) the Gbanziris as being "d'un caractère insouciant et très gai, toujours prêts à rire, à chanter et à s'amuser."

IV. Fishermen and Canoers

The Bondjos were described as great fishermen, but little is said of the Lower Ubangi inhabitants until one gets to Bangui. Masui (1897, 109) is one exception: "Le matin les Bondjo se rendent à leurs pêcheries et l'on voit alors des centaines de canots se détacher de la rive et gagner les files." For the villages of Yakuli (Jacouli) and Bagassi, see Musy (1890, 293).¹² Musy may have been wrong. The people he saw fishing on the sand banks may have been upriver people, like the Gbanziri, about whose fishing occupation there is no doubt. Le

Marinel, for example, specifically mentions (1891, 18) the Gbanziris (Bwajiris) who go downriver all the way to the Zongo rapids to fish and do business with the Ngbakas (Bakas). Musy also says that at Yakuli and Bagassi the people did not have plantations, a fact that would characterize a fishing life; the observation is repeated by Breton (ANP 7 July 1890).

As would be expected of riverine peoples, Bondjos were admired for their canoeing prowess. Of those near the Mission St. Paul des Rapides, just upriver of Bangui, for example, it was said: "Les Bondjos qui habitent ces parages sont les meilleurs pagayeurs de toute la rivière; ils passent ces rapides, sans crainte, sur de petites pirogues dans lesquelles ils se tiennent debout, et ne chavirent presque jamais" (BCSE, 1895, 17(18):559). But again the Gbanziris are considered better than Bondjos, even by a missionary at that place. P. Rémy (1863-1942) wrote of the former that they were "seuls capables de passer par ces endroits dangereux" (CSEP, Rémy 5:45).

The fact that the so-called Bondjos paddled while standing upright is a distinguishing characteristic, because the Gbanziris, the Sangos, and the "gens de la haute rivière," according to Bruel (ASOM, 8 June 1896) and others, use small paddles, seated. Another characteristic is the use of punters in addition to canoes, vividly described by Baratier ([1897], 15). The Mondjombo, who were among those called Bondjo in the early days, also paddled upright, but Bruel says nothing of their using these tombo ([1907], 9).

These inconsistencies, revealing inaccurate perceptions of the social and material cultures of the indigenous populations, did not prevent the Whites from forming policies crucial for their occupation of the territory. These policies were based in part of course on the on-going ethnography that was being done, but that ethnography was itself a product of the contact 'dialectic.' This will be seen shortly, when we address ourselves more explicitly to the Bondjo myth, considering again the part that the mobilization of the Bondjos as canoes played in it. We must first understand what fed and symbolized the virulence of 'anti-Bondjo-ism.'

V. Cannibalism

The single trait that characterized all the Bondjos as far as the Whites were concerned was cannibalism. Bruel, writing letters to his family as he makes his way upriver to his first assignment, reports (ASOM, 31 May 1896) already that the Bondjos at Moyacas are "les premiers grands Anthropophages." Yet the people just downriver, the Baloi (Baloui), were also described as cannibals, of whom Castellani wrote ([1897], 217): "Nous sommes décidément chez des barbares, de vrais sauvages et je pense que les hommes que j'ai sous les yeux occupent le dernier degré de l'échelle humaine" (a phrase echoing one used by Mgr. Augouard). For other such statements see Musy (1891), Bobichon (1932, 1), Veistroffer (1931, 156), Lajeune (1933, 46), and Delisle (1893, 56).

Writers are in agreement that the southern Bondjos acquired slaves to eat by trading ivory (Musy 1890, 292; Dybowski 1893, 126; Maistre 1895, 24; CF, 2:25), 1902, 2:25).

Descriptions of the Bondjos as cannibals become increasingly shocking as they apply to people farther up the Ubangi River. Although the lower Bondjos "considèrent seulement les esclaves comme viande de boucherie" (Maistre 1895, 24), fattening them up first (Musy 1890, 292), and killing them in sacrifices (Delisle 1892, 10fn), it was the northern ones especially of whom it was said that they fattened their own children to eat (Galinand n.d., 48), considering the flesh of children the most delicate (Sallaz 1893, 74, writing in December 1892), and that they buy children to devour them (Rémy, CSEF; Bobichon 1932, 1). For other such statements see Mgr. Augouard (CSEF, 28 August 1889), d'Uzès (1894, 186), Huot (1902, 302), and Bobichon (1932, 2).

As the years past, there was a decrease in reported cannibalism in the area, a fact that parallels the increasingly restricted use of Bondjo as an ethnic name. Although in 1901 Rousset repeated the general belief that "Toutes ces peuplades sont plus ou moins ouvertement anthropophages," he added that "La palme en ce genre de sport reviendrait incontestablement

aux naturels de la race Baya Mandjia, parmi lesquels figurent en bonne place les pseudo-Bondjos [sic]... (1901, 152-153).

Of course, Whites did not change their minds very quickly. In 1902 Colrat published his Deux ans chez les anthropophages, in which he recounts the de Mézières mission of 1898-1899, saying (page 303) that the riverine peoples who were still cannibal were the Balloi, Bandjo [sic], Salanga, Mbagga, Bouzérrou, etc. In any case, by 1911, when P. Calloc'h, a missionary of the CSE in the Ubangi basin, published about these same people, he could say (1911, 3) "Aujourd'hui ces sauvages ont beaucoup perdu de leur férocité et de leur anthropophagie."

VI. The Disappearance of the Bondjos

By the beginning of the 20th century doubt was beginning to be expressed about the existence of Bondjos as a race or tribe, although the name persists to the present day. In an administrative report of 1901 Rousset says that it was a "fausse appellation" that the M'Bakkas Mandjias were called Bondjos Baggas. In fact, he says, the so-called Bondjos Boboyas and Buzerus as well as others were all M'Bakkas Mandjias (that is, Ngbaka Mandjias, a name used today of people who speak a language belonging to the Gbaya group). He also doubts the ethnicity of the Bondjos downriver of the Lobay by referring to the people as "soidisant Bondjos" (1901, 148, 151, 152). In 1907 the only ethnic group around Bangui, according to a sketch map of Bruel (1907), is the Ngbaka (Bwaka), later observing (1918, 308) that Mondjombo and Ngbaka (Bouaka) were generally known "sous le nom impropre de Bondjo." For other such comments see Monier (ANX, 22 November 1902), Challaye (1909, 73), Kalck (1970, 2:351), and Huot (1902, 302).

In a later classification of the populations of the Haut-Oubangui-Chari Siepi does not list the Bondjo at all (1911, 47-48). In a more important work Delafosse and Poutrin (1930, 442ff) include the Bondjos, along with the Bwakas, Yanghérés, and M'Bagas, in the "Régions de

M'Poko, Moyen-Oubangui, Yanghéré, la Lobay," but unlike the others, the Bondjos are not discussed. Baumann and Westermann (1948, 290,451) go back to the earlier grouping, equating the Bondjos (with Mondjembo given as an alternative name) with the Bwaka-Mbaka.

The best description we have today is probably that of Hauser (1954), who says that Bondjo is not used of any ethnic group of itself but by the Administration to refer to a number of groups that speak Bantu languages. but Maurice Amaye reports (personal communication) that there is a sub-group of the Isungu who are known by this name. The interesting thing about this fact is that the Isungu are known also as Mbati, of whom Van Gèle reported as Batti, as we saw above, near the Ngiri River. It would appear, therefore, that from the very beginning of European occupation of this part of Africa Bondjos of some kind spoke Bantu languages.

So today Bondjos can still be found on maps, as in Born (1975, 686), but discussed in only vague ways, as in Burssens (1958). Those working on the Linguistic survey of the northern Bantu borderland in 1949-1950 had this to report (Tucker & Bryan 1956, 36; see also 59,60) about the west bank of the Ubangi, below the Lobay River:

It was found impossible to obtain conclusive evidence regarding the languages of this group owing to (i) the very nature of this sparsely populated, inaccessible, and largely unknown forest region, (ii) the confusion of names of speeches and localities which exists not only amongst Europeans but also in the minds of neighbouring Africans.

References to Bondjos in the modern colonial period, informed by 'scientific' opinion, can be multiplied: e.g. Vennetier (1965) and Soret (1978). But these do not contradict the story that is being told in this paper. Rather, they illustrate the politicization of ethnicity in colonial administration, where named human aggregates are bureaucratically manipulated, a phenomenon not unlike the one that preceded it in the period of exploration. Rigorous

classificatory schemes have now replaced the earlier contradictions but are frequently just as fanciful. In Soret (1978, 21), for example, the Bondjos are located in the following way (where dots indicate the omission of other names): Ethnic group: Sanga; Sub-group: Bondjo...; Tribe: Bondjo...; Sub-tribe: Bondjo....

By about 1910 the Bondjos had in a sense disappeared. That is, they no longer constituted an ethnic group that the Whites had to preoccupy themselves with. Almost abruptly it seems, after a little over two decades of intense interaction, for the most part disagreeable to the Whites, the Bondjos are no longer part of the hostile environment. My explanation for this is that the Bondjos were never real. They were not what Whites imagined them to be. They were a social construct of the 'Enemy'—the hostile Savage—that the French, among others, encountered as they took possession of the Ubangi basin.

VII. The Making of the Bondjo Myth

In this view of Ubangian history the Enemy was 'typified,' to use a term suggested by Berger and Luckmann (1966). They were assigned a name and given attributes consistent not only with real 'savages' making their living on the river but also with the nature of Enemy. They were therefore typically African in a general way but also having their 'tribal' characteristics.

The myth of the Bondjos arose because the Whites were challenged on their arrival in the Middle Ubangi. Inhospitable receptions were, of course, not unusual in those days. It was common for Whites to find it difficult to land ashore, to barter for food, and to establish property agreements with local populations, not to speak of being threatened (but on fewer occasions than public literature would suggest) by demonstrations of force. The French attitude is exemplified in the words of Mgr. Augouard when he wrote of the "féroce tribu des Bondjos qui au dire de tous sera la plus réfractaire à l'influence européenne." The Gbanziris,

on the other hand, he said, were "beaucoup plus douce, plus accessible" (CSEF, 12 March 1893). Huot adopted Augouard's statement and enlarged upon it (1902, 305).

Kalck's explanation for the armed resistance on the part of the locals around Bangui (1970, 2:351) is that "la majorité de la population Bouaka (dis Bondjo)" had been dispossessed by the installation of two European posts (Belgian and French) of their "contrôle de la navigation sur l'Oubangui." The task before us is, of course, to determine who had 'control' of the Ubangi River and the part over which they dominated.

First, let it be known that when Van Gèle was at the bend of the Ubangi in November 1887 he noted that "Les riverains sont paisibles et accueillants"; "'C'est le meilleur peuple que j'aie jamais rencontré'" (Cuypers 1960, 44, where Van Gèle's words are actually quoted in the second instance). And in 1888 Froment encountered peaceful, unarmed people at Impfondo (1889, 205). This much might support a hypothesis that it was White domination that aroused the hostility of the indigenous population, but was it a question of commercial competition, as Kalck hypothesizes?

The southern 'border' of the so-called Bondjos seems to coincide with the northern limits of the Bobangis, for Harms' informants, recounting their ethnic history, said that the Bobangi were prevented by the Baloi from going upstream (1978). In other words, the Baloi dominated the lower reaches of the Ubangi, that is, claimed it as their own trading territory. Such monopolies were common in this part of Africa before Whites arrived, and we can assume that the Ubangian traders maintained control over their territories just as jealously. But they did trade with each other (Musy 1890, 293; Le Marinel 1893, 21).

Whatever may have been the relationship between the peoples of the Ubangi basin, what is paramount in writing colonial history is understanding their relationship to the Whites and how they exploited the Whites to establish relationships (whenever possible to their own

advantage, of course) with each other. Kalck's history is too simple. Even if we retain its thrust, we would be closer to the truth in assuming that what the Whites did was to destroy the indigenous 'balance of power.' From trading with Whites they saw advantages; they saw disadvantages in having their traditional enemies and competitors coming into a privileged position.

delete [Kalck's error may have begun with the belief that right from the beginning, that is, when Van Gèle's expedition appeared on the scene, it was "très mal reçue par les riverains, Bongui, Mondjembo et Bouaka" (1970(2):341). Van Gèle reported to the contrary, as we noted above.

Here then, to get a better understanding of the nature of Ubangian-White contact, let us consider what the Whites wanted and needed. Canoes and canoers were indispensable. Without these the French would not have been able to occupy the territory, at least as quickly and efficiently as they did. Because the topic has already been analyzed in great detail (Samarin 1982b), the following is necessarily only a summary.

What is curious is that the very people who provided transportation (and food, although that was obtained with greater difficulty) were the very ones who were being written off as being among the world's worst creatures. These, "detestable" though they might be, were used to transport the precious provisions, arms, and trade goods that the French brought into the area. There is absolutely no evidence whatsoever that any of the so-called Bondjos were excluded from the labor force simply because they were Bondjos. If they had canoes and could paddle, they were used. But this was not a case of faute de mieux: the Bondjos, whoever they were, were admired for their canoeing prowess, as we have seen. For the role that Bondjos played in the workforce see Castellani (1892, 234) and Monier (ANX, 22 November 1902). [1897]

The Bondjos—that is, the riverine populations in the Lower and Middle Ubangi regions—were forced into obligations beyond the limits of their cultural expectations. (Africans, like human beings everywhere, could exercise themselves in terms of their self-

interests, to the point of being rapacious and bellicose, but they had their own sense of courtesy and hospitality.) And the French had pushed them too far. At the very beginning, again contradicting Kalok, relations with the natives were reported as "excellent" (Alfred, possibly Albert [hardly legible], ANX, 24 October 1889), and Bondjo workers, not merely canoers, were being recruited (possibly conscripted) at Modzaka for Bangui (Ponel, ANX, 5 November 1890). And when writing his administrative report for that same year, making recommendations for the future, Ponel argued that personnel should be recruited for the militia: "Un agent actif placé entre la Kandjia et le Kouango (upriver of Bangui) rendrait grands services, recruterait tout comme nos voisins le font [that is, the Belgians] et permettrait à la Zone Oubangui de demander peu de Miliciens au Chef-lieu. Les postes du Haut seraient garnis de Bondjos, ceux du bas de Ouaddahs, Ban-Ziris [Gbanziris], Sakas" (Ponel, ANX.4(3)D1, Bangui, 11 February 1891). In other words, he was proposing sending recruits from one ethnic group into the territory of another. (There is no evidence that this proposal was enacted in the 19th century.) And in October of 1892 people on the Lower Ubangi were said to be tranquil (d'Uzès 1894, 131).

Almost immediately relations are perilous. Early in 1894 Kerraoul, the administrator at Bangui, is reported to have said that he could not assure the safety of missionaries at St. Paul des Rapides because of the Bondjos, who are described in Mgr. Augouard's words at least as being "au dernier degré de l'échelle humaine; ce sont les hyènes de l'humanité" (CSEF, 11 January 1894).). Indeed, for the next number of years most of the statements about danger from the Bondjos come from the missionaries, a fact that does not distort the present analysis but only illustrates the use that they were putting the Bondjos to in their communications with their constituencies. Mgr. Augouard in particular exploited the accounts in a propagandist manner: CSEF, 8 July 1897; 1 July 1898; 18 June 1899; also Moreau, CSEF, Ste. Famille, 22 May 1898.

But administrative reports reinforce the picture. In 1895 Bondjos could not be counted on for work because of the repressive measures that had been taken against them (Furiet, ANX, 31 August 1895). Of that year 1895 Liotard wrote (ANPM n, p. 81): "on a obligé les villages Bondjos à fournir des payeurs."

The reports were not always consistent, and this is what we would expect. Typifications are always contradicted by real life. For the year 1897 Castellani says that the Bondjos are afraid of the Whites and do not pose a real danger around Bangui regardless of what people say ([1897], 254).

What this account demonstrates is that relations between the Ubangians and the French not only had turned sour but had become for the natives intolerable and for the usurpers insupportable—each for their own reasons. Being forced to provide canoes, canoers, and provisions was not something that the Bondjos had bargained for. And they were even forced into fealty. As early as 1889, even when relations were reported as being excellent, when the chief of one large village on the French side "ne voulait pas venir pour faire camarade [that is, exchange blood to establish a blood-brother relationship] (c'est l'expression consacrée)," Uzac, who was 'chef de région' at Mossaka, "avec 10 hommes, débarque un bon matin, tue 5 hommes, enlève 7 pirogues, des cabris, des poules et brûle tout de fond en comble" (Musy 1891, 133, writing at Bangui on October 20, 1889). Failure to cooperate in those days, in other words, was in the semantics of colonialism considered rebelliousness in the political and military sense.

The Whites were not alone responsible for the 'bad blood' that characterized the relations between the expatriates and natives. Again and again their foreign workers, especially the Senegalese soldiers, made trouble with the residents whom they, just as strongly as the Whites, considered savages. The Bondjos, wrote Liotard as he made his way from Bangui in 1892, close everything up at the approach of convoys: "Depuis que les pirogues sillonnent la

rivière on n'a pu communiquer avec ces villages." The Gbanziris and Sangos in the convoys steal chickens and goats in these villages, and the Senegalese, when there is no White with them, use their guns menacingly, frightening these "timorous people," and help themselves to provisions (Liotard, ANPMj, June 25, 1897).

It would appear from the present account that Bondjo ethnicity was a creation of the French, because they figure most prominently in the story. (Of the Whites mentioned only Hanssens, Van Gèle, and Le Marinel were in King Leopold's service.) And it would appear that the drama takes place only on one side of the Ubangi River. There is nothing certainly in the geography that would account for what we have learned.¹³ Riverine populations occupied both sides of the river over all its length and in fact moved back and forth in this decade, according to their needs for safety, freedom from conscription, etc. As for the Belgians, they were just as busy on the river as the French, if not more so. Yet none of the extant or available sources reveals anything like what we find in the French sources. The explanation must surely be that these Lower and Middle Ubangians were less important for Belgian expansion. The Belgians were preoccupied with the upper reaches of the Ubangi, where early in the decade they were having great success. Their resources, besides, freed them from the kind of dependence that characterized the French enterprise. They had, moreover, their own good and bad natives with which they could people their accounts. (This topic, as it relates to the Bangalas and the Bakongos, is taken up in Samarin, in press. See also Samarin 1982a.)

The Bondjo story is therefore almost entirely a French one, in its development and in its exploitation. (For events that were going on at the end of the century and the beginning of the following in Belgian territory, see Mumbanza 1980.) But it was not French in its inception. As the name Bondjo goes back to the very beginning of the exploration of the Ubangi, so does the characterization of the people. And they literally became for the Whites what they were perceived to be.

The beginning most certainly was during the period of Stanley's exploration of the equatorial elbow of the Congo River. It was he who first reported (1885, 2:70; see also 69) that the Baloi (Balui) were pirates and "very daring people." So it is no wonder that Van Gèle, who was involved in the establishment of the station of Equateur, is said to have also considered these people "farouches pirates" (Froment 1889, 193). Now the Baloi, as we have seen, were people living in the region of the mouth of the Ngiri River and considered later by some explorers as Bondjos. This, I believe, is where the myth arose.

The Whites adopted a characterization that became part of their 'knowledge,' which they later embellished and by which they lived. But it was knowledge that was first given to them as information—that is, 'knowledge' in the sociological sense, by another people. What happened, I believe, is that the equatorial people along the Congo, who had become partners with the Whites in various aspects of colonization and who had been competitors of the Lower Ubangians, exploited their privileged relationship with the Whites to what they hoped would be the disadvantage of the former. This is exactly what happened, as we have seen, with respect to the Gbanziris and the Bondjos around Bangui.

The story of the Bondjos, therefore, is an old, old story—as old as the rivalry between the peoples of this rich and heavily populated area; old also in the patterns that everywhere characterize social solidarities and exclusions. The Whites were absorbed as participants in the story, the Belgians taking sides with their allies, the so-called Bangalas; the French had theirs as well. The new story as adopted by the French was, of course, different in many ways. It was as it always is with myths: a people takes available motifs and uses them for its purpose. The cultural contexts are different. The audience is different.

Conclusion

The ethnicity of the Bondjos could have been created in the minds of the Europeans only by a gradual process of observation and interpretation. But the process started with the naming of the Ubangian peoples, very soon after the first Whites went up the river. Once they were named, they existed; succeeding Whites were involved mostly in the process of defining who were Bondjos among these people and what were their characteristics. Statements about Bondjos are generally categorical. This assertive, immodest kind of ethnography creates problems for reconstructive ethnography—our present task—but it created a world in which the 19th-century European could live: it was the first 'hermeneutic' by which he made sense of the bewildering impressions he had and by which he could order his life and that of the indigenous populations. If colonization brought order into chaos—as the work of civilization was understood to do—it did it by means of conceptual order created within the very world which it was (re)making into its own image. The European brought some material with him, something with which to begin his work of structuring knowledge, but he also was being formed by the process of understanding. This is the reason why this history of Bondjo ethnicity is also a history of ethnocentricity. And European racism is continuous with African racism.¹⁹

Notes

1. Dates in square brackets are attributed to publications by myself on the basis of internal or other kinds of evidence.

2. The name of the river is spelled Mboundgou in the ING map of 1884, where the digraph 'dg' (as in the English word 'edge') may have been used for the sound represented here by 'dj.'

3. For a bibliography of published material on Sango see Samarin 1967 and 1970, Diki-Kidiri 1977, and Bouquiaux 1978.

4. It is difficult to believe that this was only the fourth village in existence, since many villages can be cited from all the sources. What he seems to have meant is the ones they stopped at on the trip.

5. In the map of Pelet (1899) Liboko is located on the left bank of the Ubangi at about 1°20' N whereas in the map of Blink (1891) this is the name of the Ubangi at its confluence with the Congo.

6. Its chief at the time of contact with Whites was Betu, and the village is also known by that name. Clerc (1911, 303) locates it at 3° N.

7. I speculate that it was the Swahili-speaking personnel of the Whites who rendered these names with 'y,' for there is considerable evidence that 'z' was being replaced by 'y' in the newer forms of Swahili that were emerging with the increasing use of Africans from the hinterlands of East Africa. If this is correct, we would have precious information about the pidginization of Swahili as it spread into the interior of Africa.

8. For which see Kalck 1970, 2:346; Veistroffer 1931, 144; [1933], 34; and Mazenot 1970, 85fn. This is therefore too far north for the attack cited by Mazenot. He says that it took place at 1°4'.

9. P. Marc Pédron, born in 1877, was not consecrated until 9 July 1901. So his acquaintance with this Bondjo chief, if indeed it was the same one, was made within a year probably after that date. See the necrology by P. Fédoux, *BCSE* 1937, No.567:305-314.

10. For similar statements see Challaya 1909, 60; Vaistroffer 1931, 156; Bruel, *ASOM*, 31 May 1896; Bruel [1907]; Baratier [1897], 11; Maistre 1895, 25; Castellani [1897], 223; Rousset 1901, 152; Cuypers 1960, 39.

11. These are discussed by name in Lékens 1923. Mumbanza mwa Bawele (1980) deals with blacksmithing on the Ngiri River.

12. Kalok (1970, 2:351) locates Yakoli just a half-hour away from Bangui, presumably by canoe.

13. This is not to say that geography is irrelevant to the story. The fact that vast areas of the Lower Ubangi region are covered by water in the Wet Season would surely have something to do with what the Whites actually saw as they travelled and what people they came in contact with.

Bangui.

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