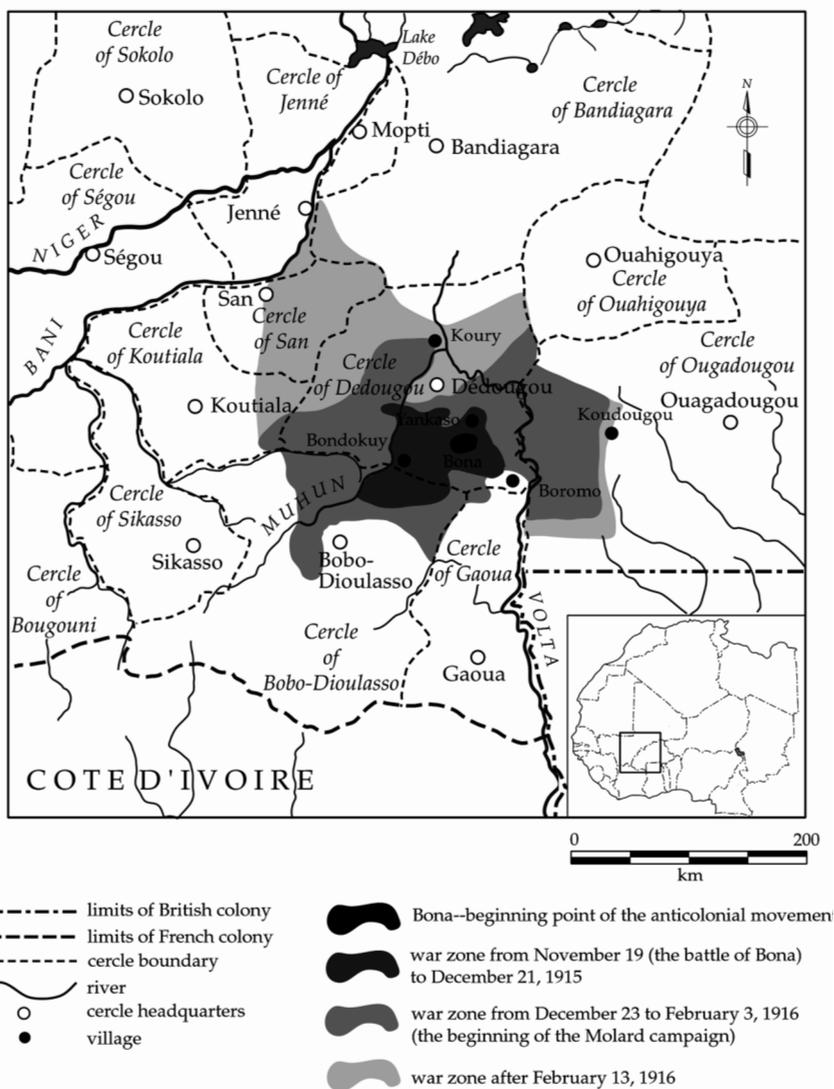


# Introduction

IN THE FINAL MONTHS of 1915, the prominent residents of eleven villages in the Volta region of French West Africa gathered around a shrine to take an oath and declare war on the colonial administration. Thus started the Volta-Bani war, one of the last and bloodiest confrontations of the colonial occupation of West Africa. This book presents a historiographic account and an anthropological interpretation of this extraordinary series of events. It provides simultaneously a cultural and sociological analysis that reconsiders the historical ethnography of the region, the context for the colonial encounter, and a chronological narrative of the political and military realities of the anticolonial movement.

The anticolonial leadership taking the initiative for the war had not gone into this dangerous affair blindly or in a fit of anger. They had calculated their odds well and had undertaken a tremendous effort of preparation. They were well armed, they knew the art of fighting, they had confidence in their spiritual agencies, and as it turned out they were also geniuses of military tactics and strategy. They defeated the first expeditions that the administrator of the cercle (province) of Dedougou hastily arranged with the means at his disposal. They also defeated the larger military column that was put together by the governor-general of French West Africa, which included companies from other parts of the colony and an artillery unit.

World War I was raging in Europe, and the military apparatus of the colonial government had been reduced to the absolute minimum. The government's inability to crush the opposition confirmed the claims of the anticolonial partisans that the time had come to force the French out of the region. The movement spread. By



**Map 1. The Volta and Bani conflict zone. Redrawn and modified from a map included in the Picanon report (ANSOM 2762).**

January 1916, hundreds of villages had taken up arms in the cercles of Dedougou and Bobo-Dioulasso and in the Koudougou residency of Ouagadougou. That month, the government-general of French West Africa gathered most of its available military resources in the war zone into one column and launched its offensive, “a repression effort without precedent in the history of the French Soudan.”<sup>1</sup>

On February 14, 1916, the column embarked on a campaign of repression by systematic destruction, and slightly more than a month later, on March 23, it

returned to its headquarters in Dedougou, having exhausted most of its ammunition. The anticolonial combatants interpreted the column's return as a defeat, and the movement entered another phase of expansion. In March it spread to the cercles of Koutiala, San, and Bandiagara, all between the Muhun (the former Black Volta) and Bani Rivers. It covered an area of about one hundred thousand square kilometers inhabited by Marka, Bwa, Samo, Fulbe, Tusia, Sambla, Minyanaka, Bobo, Lela, Nuna, and Ko communities. It put at risk what a French report called "our very domination in the whole of the Niger Bend region."<sup>2</sup>

In April, bolstered by new regiments, brought with great difficulty from all over French West Africa, and fresh munitions and supplies, two separate columns started a second campaign against the anticolonial forces. Laying waste wherever they went, they managed by the end of July to destroy the strongest centers of opposition in the cercles of Dedougou and Bobo-Dioulasso, and in the Koudougou region. The Marka leadership that had initiated the war started to waver. Many of them were killed or imprisoned; some of them surrendered. But the war picked up in the Bani valley, and some of the original leaders were able to join the conflict there. By mid-September, these movements were quelled, communication between San, Koutiala, and Dedougou was reestablished, and the opposition collapsed into isolated confrontations.

For the French, the final episode of the movement was the destruction of Lahirasso in the cercle of Bobo-Dioulasso in February 1917. But whereas the war can be said to have had a formal beginning with the public declaration in which the core of the anticolonial leadership announced its opposition, it did not have an end of the same sort. There was no treaty—no agreement binding all participants. Each village or ward or even a fraction thereof surrendered separately. As some areas capitulated, other areas continued the fight with even more ferocity. Some communities submitted to force in the course of the repression, but later took up arms again. The staunch determination of the anticolonial partisans had such a horrendous effect on the French that even after all enemy centers and all organized opposition was destroyed they still could not believe that the resistance had truly ended. For years afterward, in every dry season they feared that violent opposition would resurge.

## THE SCOPE OF THE WAR

The scale of this anticolonial war raises several questions: How were the resisters able to marshal such tremendous resources and what kind of society was it that made this mobilization possible? How did this society articulate with the

occupying colonial forces? Such questions pose many challenges to the conventional understanding of the historical ethnography of this region and some accounts of the establishment of the early colonial state.

The year-long confrontation in the Volta-Bani region brought the colonial administration up against approximately a thousand villages, representing a population of between eight hundred thousand and nine hundred thousand people. This was about 8 percent of the total population of French West Africa, which was estimated at eleven million at that time.<sup>3</sup> There were four distinct arenas to the war. In the principal arena—the cercle of Dedougou—for many battles the anticolonial party was able to gather fifteen thousand to twenty thousand soldiers at the height of the war, from February to June, when successive engagements were only one or two days apart.

These forces were heavily armed with flintlock muskets, gunpowder, an abundance of projectiles for muzzle loading, and arrows. Some of this armament was purchased from craftsmen and traders; some of it was produced locally. The blacksmiths took to manufacturing arrow tips, projectiles for muskets, and gunpowder. Much of their work was done privately as the arms market took off with the beginning of the preparations. In “Nienegue” country (southern Bwa) some communities organized a large-scale industrial effort outside market channels, bringing the blacksmiths together in secret places to mine and smelt the iron ore. Nor were the blacksmiths the only nonfighters on whose contribution the war effort depended. During the year, a large number of fortress walls were built and rebuilt, entire villages being partly reerected after having been razed. This construction activity required the collection of materials and the transportation of water and dirt across long distances in the dry season. Foodstuffs and animals were also transported and stockpiled. These arduous tasks were performed by women and children—participants who are often omitted from war histories, except when they become casualties or captives.

As in many other anticolonial confrontations, there was a total lack of parity between the weapons of the two sides. The anticolonial side had superiority in numbers, but the colonial troops had the superior firearms. Many of the battles left hundreds of dead on the opposers’ side, but only a few on the colonial side. In the most extreme case, on May 6, in the battle of Boho, in the cercle of Bobo-Dioulasso, more than two thousand people lay dead on the ground by the end of the day. The total number of people killed in the entire war is impossible to determine with accuracy, in part because not all official reports listed enemy casualties and also because between major battles many poorly documented confrontations took place between anticolonial forces and villages

that either refused to join the opposition or supported the administration. We estimate that the deaths on the African side were at least thirty thousand. In the areas of heavy fighting—that is, in the cercle of Dedougou and the northern half of Bobo-Dioulasso—several villages lost more than half their populations. Because losses were particularly severe among men between the ages of eighteen to thirty-five, the distortion introduced into the demographic structure of the population was felt for years afterward.

Again as in some other anticolonial wars, there is an anachronistic “modern feel” to the Volta-Bani war. The repressive activity of the French took the form of a total war, as opposed to the familiar war of the trenches of the World War I period. During and after the war, the colonial army deliberately targeted women and children as captives and hostages. With its auxiliary forces, it destroyed food reserves and ripening crops and prevented the establishment of farms. It carried off herds to feed its own soldiers and to bring to heel the indomitable enemy. It poisoned the wells and in other ways kept people from reoccupying the deserted villages. All these activities added casualties to those on the battlegrounds. Such “collateral damage” was not accounted for in administrative reports but was recorded in casual remarks and preserved in oral memory. Mortality was so high that the living were often unable to bury the dead. In some places, bodies lay exposed for months on roads, in fields, and in clearings.

On the French side also, the number of forces mobilized was extremely high, compared both with most of what had preceded in African colonial history and with all that was yet to come up to the middle of the century. About five thousand soldiers participated in the French colonial columns, approximately half of whom were *tirailleurs*—that is, enlisted African soldiers of the French colonial army who had been recruited in other parts of West Africa. The rest were “auxiliary soldiers,” mounted and infantry, provided by African chiefs allied to the colonial government, and a smaller number of guards who were hired by the cercle administration. Six cannons and four machine-gun units supported this army. In addition, an even larger number of carriers and other nonfighters were recruited for support services and logistics. This was “the largest number of men and the most powerful armament that had been used to that day in French West Africa.”<sup>4</sup> It should be remembered that for the capture of the fortress of Sikasso in 1898, the greatest military feat in the French conquest of West Africa, the colonial army was less than one-third that size (Méniand 1935, 89; Griffeth 1968, 141). Most of the territory of the Volta region that constitutes Burkina Faso today was occupied with fighting forces of a few hundred.

## THE ANTICOLONIAL LEADERSHIP

The 1915–16 Volta-Bani War was a “primary resistance” movement, to use a common expression first suggested by Terence Ranger. We should not imagine, however, that it mushroomed spontaneously among all these populations that participated in it, or that it resulted from religious fervor or mystical ties between its participants. What brought the heterogeneous anticolonial party together was a political project: to end colonial occupation. The Volta-Bani War had neither pamphlet writers, labor-union organizers, mission-educated elite, nor decorated officers, but it had the equivalent of all of these in a cadre of very remarkable people. The movement struck a chord with the readiness and desire of the majority of the population where it spread, but there can be little doubt that it was also the initiative of a restricted group of leadership that conceived the movement and carried it through. We have the names of many, but not all, of these leaders. In the vast area of war operations, several of them led an itinerant existence, and sometimes they cultivated an air of mystery and secrecy about themselves, thus making it difficult to match archival information with oral accounts.

The single most important figure in the conception and planning of the movement was Yisu Kote, of the village of Bona. It is risky to venture strong affirmations with so much that needs to be reconstructed from an imprecise record, but it seems fairly safe to claim that without him this movement either would not have come into being or would have been something different. Yisu first urged his cousin Yike Kote (who held the office of *perenkie*, head of fighting-age young men) to convince the customary authorities of Bona and of nearby villages that were historically allied to Bona to convene and discuss a declaration of war on the white man. Today in the villages of the bend of the Muhun River, Yisu Kote is remembered as tirelessly visiting each village, wearing two cords made of hibiscus fibers, the conventional badge of accomplished warriors—one wrapped around his head and the other hanging from his neck. He also carried a whistle, which was the ceremonial paraphernalia of fighting-age grades. Yisu exhorted the population to join the fight, threatening the waverers with retaliation and mystical misfortunes. In colonial records, he appears as “the fetishist of Bona,” a dark and distant presence in the horrifying events that were taking place. It is important to note that Yisu was no appointed officeholder in the formal structures of the village of Bona or in the small, original alliance around it. His position of preeminence was his own creation, resulting from his personal vision, conviction, and strength. Important historical factors added to this personal aura, as ex-

plained in chapter 5, but these should not make us lose sight of the fact that it was he who mobilized them with exceptional qualities to forge the emblematic role that he played in the movement.

Siaka, of Datomo, was a war leader in Pompoï, Kopoï, Bagassi, and Pa, and in Nienegue country in the south. The other commanders of the military action included M'Bien Nienzien, of the village of Tunu; Tara, of the village of La; Wani, of Cheriba; M'Bwa, of Bagasi; and Domba, of Banu, who directed the war in the Yankasso-Tiga-Cheriba region and, later, in the Nuna country to the east. Among the leaders of the southern Marka zone was Abdulaye Ba, a "young Fulbe chief"; Tembe, the famous general of the Nienegue of the cercle of Bobo-Dioulasso, who was killed early in March 1916 in skirmishes with the passing Amalric company; and Beniamu, the leader of the Dampan ward in Bondokuy. When the movement entered its second phase, it spawned some territorial organization and developed a kind of ranking of its leaders. Batieri, of Sanaba, on the west bank of the Muhun River, led the spread of the movement to the Bani valley, and the Muslim leader Adama Dembele, of the village of Kula, emerged as the critical figure in the north of the cercle of San and in the south of the cercle of Bandiagara; Dasa, from the region of Bona, took charge of the southern part of the cercle of San. In the residency of Koudougou, to the east, two leaders from Marka country, Dahuda and Lasana, were very active; a third, Yombie, of local origin, who had been a groom for a Mose chief, or *naaba*, became a legendary figure.

These people had uncommon gifts to improvise and innovate, to keep the movement alive in its various phases. Their work stamped its course at different levels. First, they engaged in remarkable diplomacy and propaganda to convey their vision of the possibility of this movement. They went to the villagers using alternatively and simultaneously arguments of different orders, ranging from the immediate hardships resulting from colonial interference to the deepest anxieties and fears of the population, such as the taking away of their young men for the porter columns and recruitment for the French army. They stressed the chances for successful military action, the promising omens of trusted and venerated shrines, and the historical prestige of the fighters of the Bona alliance.

They proved also to be remarkable military leaders, learning from experience, diffusing innovations, and coordinating the various parts of the movement. The French officers in charge of the repression observed that, despite different traditions, settlement patterns, and population densities, there was a common strategy throughout the vast territories that participated in the war. This sense of unity was due largely to a mobile leadership that actively took

charge of the battles in widely separated zones. The tactics were also flexible. The battle leaders constantly came up with new ways to disorient the French and make the best of their own limited-range firepower.

The movement leaders cleverly exploited their initial military successes. They used terror as a deterrent, forcing those who hesitated into compliance by threatening them physically as well as with the prospect of being left alone in a country abandoned by the defeated colonial troops. Such activity minimized the support that the wandering colonial columns received in the countryside. Without matching, numerically, the barbarism of the colonial army's collective punishments, the anticolonial partisans celebrated victories with sometimes bloody and cruel ritualized performances. Their propaganda was ingenious. After the second battle of Bona — one that was disastrous for the French — they paraded in all villages the seized personal effects of the European officers and colonial army material, a practice repeated thereafter following every successful engagement.

The exhibition of colonial objects was intended to overcome the widespread sense in the region of French invulnerability. Worldly success, knowledge, and the favor of suprahuman agencies are intricately enmeshed for local people, and the French superiority in the battles of the initial conquest period was interpreted as a sign of French mystical inviolability. To counter that sentiment, anticolonial partisans targeted with particular ferocity the few French officers who commanded the colonial units. Scores of partisans got themselves killed by deliberately venturing close in order to make a more decided hit on a white man. In fact, very few of these Frenchmen were killed, although several were wounded; the few fatalities, however, were exploited out of all proportion as central victories, and in the remote parts of the war scene they spread as exaggerated rumors that all the Frenchmen in Dedougou had been killed.

This leadership was carried out in an ethos and context very different from those modeled on recent European armies, with hierarchical command and centralized budget and supplies. The anticolonial forces of the Volta-Bani were made up of volunteers — peasant farmers who came to the battlefield with their own weapons and supplies and who stayed together as long as they each individually believed in the cause. For as long as they trusted their leaders, they would follow instructions even when to do so put their lives at risk. That a high degree of discipline, so startling and even flustering to their French opponents, was achieved in catastrophic engagements is a measure of the command of this leadership.

In the biographies of some of the leaders of the movement we find elements that are familiar from the historical ethnographic sources for this region —

elements associated with men of the precolonial warrior stratum: for example, the leadership of the perenkie organization in Marka country; *sofa* status, of captive origin in the service of leaders combining warfare and trade; and Muslim clerical status in an environment of non-Muslim practice and orientation. What was novel in 1915–16 was that most of these leaders recognized the higher rank of the small circle of leadership in the area of Bona. Leaders in other places sent sacrificial animals for the shrine of Bona and symbolic shares of the spoils; in turn, these local leaders received from the leaders in Bona declarations of recognition, countergifts that expressed this recognition in tangible ways, and objects of mystical support from the central shrine.

This kind of ranking among the leaders of a vast region did not exist in earlier social organization, at least, not in this way, but the fact that it emerged in these unusual circumstances forces us to reconsider how these societies have so far been described in the literature. The Marka leadership of Bona even seems to have adopted elements from the hegemonic language of the fledgling colonial administration. They declared, for example, that they would replace the French and impose taxation, and Yombie is said to have announced that after the victory he was going to take up residence in Ouagadougou. There are similarities, in all this, with other primary resistance movements, if not with resistance in general. At times the leaders appear as if they desired colonial office without colonialism. It is indeed a matter of curiosity to think what might have happened had the movement succeeded beyond the initial phase of anticolonial struggle.

None of this, however, should make us forget the fervor with which most of the population participated in the movement and the loyalty they felt to the cause. One of the movement's most striking symbols was the collective effort in parts of the cercle of Dedougou to transform the colonial roads into farms by sowing millet on them, "because they no longer had a use for them."<sup>5</sup> Roads stand as the emblem of the colonial period. The drudgery of the labor expended on them enters all stories of that time. Until the end of the colonial period, all roads were built and maintained with requisitioned manual labor. But to what end? The roads did not make much sense as economic initiative, especially in the early period before the cars came, as Erdmute Alber points out in an imaginative essay (2000), and they cannot be fully accounted for as a military measure, either. One way to understand this impulsive road-building project is to connect it to the colonial officers' need to restructure "wild" space, and as tangible proof of their determination to reach and rule the locals. They were also monuments to the coercive apparatus that extracted the human resources that were necessary to build them. How significant, then, was the

countersymbol that emerged from the peasant logic!—to erase the roads from the landscape by planting them with millet and sorghum, the staple crops of the region.

## WAR, COLONIALISM, AND ANTHROPOLOGY

Much attention is given in this book to the military aspects of the confrontation, going beyond their connection to sociopolitical organization. Chapter 6 describes the first critical battles that set the war on its course, and in chapters 7 to 10 we look at the different phases and arenas of the war. We show the particular antecedents that conditioned the anticolonial opposition in each one of these arenas and we provide as accurate as possible a chronology of the main engagements. This is the contribution of our book to local historiography. We also discuss overall strategy and the questions of supply and draw the implications for the understanding of the type of society that produced this war effort. In chapter 7, which deals with the main arena of the war, there is an extensive commentary on the strategy and tactics of the two sides and the conduct of battle. This attention to detail is in part a burden imposed on this work for being the first comprehensive account on the topic; in the scattered literature, even the main outline of an overall chronology has not previously been available. The war was a pan-regional phenomenon, and when it is thus understood, and when the military effort and ingenuity that went into it is recognized, some previous assessments are likely to change.

A more general reason for laying emphasis on the military facet of the anticolonial movement is that much of what has been said about political organization in precolonial Africa and on resistance movements has military implications and corollaries. Classical anthropology remained aloof to the domain of warfare,<sup>6</sup> and the recent turn toward history in anthropology, despite the growing fascination with colonialism as part of it, continues this tradition. A bridge has not been built between the humanities and military history, although a new military history exploring the relationship between war and society in a more profound manner emerged almost twenty years ago (Vandervort 1998).

An older “anthropology of war” is relevant to our theme. This field of study developed in the United States in the 1960s in the favorable environment provided by the antiwar movement. Many studies then employed a comparative approach, surveying world cultures, which was fashionable at the time, to identify variables that promote war or inhibit it. Much of value can be found in the

large body of research that has thus been generated. More recently, the *War and Society* series published under the general editorship of S. P. Reyna and R. E. Downs is rich with extended monographs.<sup>7</sup> The focus of this book does not make it easy to engage with the comparative earlier portion of this literature. Its questions were mostly formulated on the basis of an abstract conception of war, and they engaged the researchers in the path of paradigmatic explanations. We are concerned here with the different project of providing a historical account that focuses on specific social practices, colonial conventions, the day-to-day decisions of the actors, and interpretations based on contingent as well as permanent factors. Works that compare the relationship between society and warfare within a circumscribed ethnographic and historical setting have been more inspiring for us. Among these stands out a collection that includes several contributions on our geographic area of research (Bazin and Terray 1982).

Anthropological work on African political organization relies heavily on the contrast between noncentralized political systems and kingdoms. Despite many criticisms directed from a variety of angles, political analysis in Africanist anthropology often falls back on this dichotomy, and the history of colonial occupation and resistance cannot escape it. It was once believed, for example, that “states” in Africa, because of their large armies, offered the stronger resistance to Europeans (Crowder 1971, 3). This is no longer recognized as true. Our problem is that, when presented as a form of political organization that can stand by itself, the segmentary model inhibits a more comprehensive understanding of the history of the west Volta. It blinds researchers to broad regional processes that shaped local histories and that stem not from kinship but from alliances across large distances, carried out through couriers, letters, oaths, and contracts. This shortcoming cannot be remedied by simply recognizing that the so-called noncentralized societies, too, can offer serious resistance. The dichotomy still acts on perceptions. It is sometimes imagined, for example, that resistance in “tribal” societies was spontaneous, uncoordinated, or even a suicidal “let me deal a blow and then die” kind of reaction. This was not the case in the west Volta, and so the question becomes: How, some twenty years into the colonial period, did the so-called acephalous societies of the west Volta organize the effective anticolonial opposition that is described in this book? And why were they difficult to “penetrate” in the last decade of the nineteenth century? What was the social pattern, what were the resources? Posing a model of “segmentary political systems” does not provide answers that are valid for this region.

Michel Izard (1993, 1997, 1999) interprets the conquest of the west Volta region and the 1915–16 events in contrast to the Mose of Yatenga, on which he

has extensively written. He thinks that in the west Volta a difference existed between a narrow community space and global space. When foreign aggression provoked a transition to a war situation, global space took over, and the segmentary communities united and acquired, temporarily, a form comparable to state formations. The military successes of the acephalous-type societies are due to a combination of great mobilizing capacities and diffuse decision making. Pushing this analysis even further, we can break more clearly from the segmentary/centralized dichotomy. The organizational capacity that became manifest in the time of war was not created out of nothing; it persisted at other times in other ways. Village alliances were the building blocs of this organization, and networks of big men across large distances formed enduring ties between some of them even when large-scale foreign aggression did not exist.

In fact, the view that aggression was often “foreign” is an unfortunate hangover of the notion of “segmentary” political organization, and of the rarely explicitly stated correlate assumption of inherent peacefulness. Before the arrival of the French, much of the aggression was not “external” at all, but only a new configuration of forces that were already present in the locality, even if only in dispersed form. An event or personality provided the spark that ignited a movement sweeping communities *as if* it were a foreign power, realigning former parochial animosities and absorbing them into a larger entity in the form of a regional front between two gigantic opponents. Even the French colonial occupation, although certainly triggered by unconnected events in distant Europe, can be read not as totally “foreign” but as a catalysis that gave new shape to local hostilities. In chapters 1 to 3, we reformulate in this light the nineteenth-century political organization of the west Volta societies and provide a brief account of the initial French occupation. The 1915–16 anticolonial movement arose from the social foundation that made the initial penetration and early colonial control of the west Volta difficult for the French. This analysis of precolonial society provides the ground for interpreting the purposes, desires, and resources of the anticolonial partisans of the Volta and Bani regions.

At the outbreak of the Volta-Bani War in 1915, the French had tenuously occupied the area under discussion for about seventeen years. They had been able to collect some taxes, levy forced labor, and had recently even started to recruit conscripts for the famous French Black army, a practice that loomed large in subsequent explanations of the origin of the war. This initial French occupation removed some of the largest players in the regional political realm, but as we explain in chapter 3, it did not immediately dissolve the precolonial social formation. The administrative and later ethnological view that this region was made

up simply of juxtaposed villages, all equivalent and similar, all fending for themselves, is a byproduct of this elimination or subjugation of major political leaders. However, connections between villages persisted along with the long-term links and the political culture that allowed for broader mobilization.

In 1916, the French commander of the principal column of repression, Colonel Molard, wrote: "These populations . . . in a sense were never conquered by arms, but attached, so to speak, to the bloc of French West Africa simply by their consent."<sup>8</sup> This consent was not obtained freely, but by the practice or threat of violence. Still, Molard's words echo those uttered by the principal orator in the fateful meeting that took place in the village of Dahuan, in the last week of November 1915, to seal a broader alliance against the French (a meeting we describe more fully in chapter 5): "The whites came to our country. We let them, thinking that they would behave like the Fulbe, that is without interfering in our business." For the people of the country the French were powerful but distant intruders. The communities bowed to them as one bows to force, as they had done to other powerful actors before. But this was only a temporary expedient. They did not in the same act surrender sovereignty. Throughout the region, what is comparable to the European notion of political sovereignty lay in complicated arrangements of first occupant and shrine that were not always homologous even to the settlement pattern in villages.

The colonial newcomers, however, had refused to behave according to this code. They had not been content simply to enjoy the contingent advantages of superior force expressed in the idiom of alliance, which implied respect of local autonomy and some minimal reciprocal gestures of solidarity. Instead, they had insisted on the full trappings of territorial control. The second element of the situation, which is fully expressed in other contexts, is that the French superiority of force had, according to appearances, now eroded. But the French continued to act as superior, expecting from the villagers the loyalty of subjects to legitimate authority. The difference between yielding intermittently to force, which was the local reading of the brief colonial experience at this point, and accepting subjecthood, which was the French presumption, explains many early colonial episodes in West Africa. The initial French occupation looked to the village communities of the west Volta like a weak state (the villages and the alliances they formed) being blustered by a strong state. Being compelled by a foreign power is not the same thing as accepting to become a province in its state apparatus. Where the French thought administration, the locals saw gunboat diplomacy, if not outright banditry. The colonial assertions of territorial control and government did not have their counterpart in local perception. In

this important sense, the defeat of the Volta-Bani movement in 1916 represented the true conquest of this territory.

It follows that the habitual distinction made in the literature on colonialism between “resistance,” designating opposition to conquering armies at the time of the initial European occupation, and “rebellion,” describing opposition after the conquest is completed, is not very pertinent to the events we describe here. In many West African settings, the difference between “conquest” and the following stage of “pacification” has meaning only from the perspective of the international agreements that the colonizing European powers made among themselves at the outset of the scramble for Africa. The word *rebellion* veils the magnitude of the violence of 1915–16, which dwarfed that of the initial penetration of the late nineteenth century. More importantly, it clouds the issue of legitimacy by implying that the communities had at some earlier moment resigned themselves to the occupation. A proper understanding of the motivations of the African leadership that launched the war in November 1915 rests on recognizing that this was not the case.

The people of the west Volta region remember the 1915–16 events as a war among autonomous parties, not as a rebellion against higher authority. In the Marka areas within the bend of the river, whence the original leadership cadre came, people remember these events as Bona-kele, the War of Bona. In the Bwa language, they are remembered as *hyen*, in the Nuna language as *twa*, in Bobo as *kun*, in Sambla as *kaa*—all words that can be translated as *war*, but not, appropriately, as *revolt* or *rebellion*. We follow the same usage. In the rare instances that we use the expressions *rebellion* or *insurrection* in this book, we do it to signal the perspective of the colonial power.

## THE ETHNIC PUZZLE

The land between the Nazinon (formerly, the Red Volta) and Bani Rivers supplies a bewildering multitude of ethnic labels and language names. For this kaleidoscopic reality, early colonial administrators used belittling words: *anarchy* or *poussière*—a dust cloud, or sprinkle, of peoples.<sup>9</sup> The anticolonial movement originating in Bona very quickly crossed the linguistic, religious, administrative, and geographic boundaries by which the people of this area have been classified by outsiders. On the face of it, there is no reason why this should be surprising. The emphasis put on ethnicity, however—first in the colonial mindset, later in anthropology, and finally and derivatively in history—transformed

the expansion of the movement into an intellectual problem that demands an explanation. If the Bwa, Marka, Bobo, Lela, Nuna, Sambla, Tusia, Minyanka, Fulbe, and so forth are each assumed to have a different worldview and therefore a distinctive political organization, how is it that people from all these backgrounds collaborated so closely on this occasion?

That puzzle is a perfect example of the burden that Africanist anthropology has inherited from nineteenth-century frames of reference. The more sociologically oriented approaches of the interwar period had made some progress in relativizing the significance of tribes and ethnic groups in the discourse of Africanist anthropology, but in recent years ethnicity made a comeback under different guises, despite the protests of some historians. Terence Ranger writes, for example, that

far from there being a single tribal identity, most Africans moved in and out of multiple identities, defining themselves at one moment as subjects to this chief, at another moment as a member of that cult, at another moment as part of this clan, and at yet another moment as an initiate in that professional guild. These overlapping networks of association and exchange extended over wide areas. (Ranger 1983, 248)

In the Volta region, ethnicity did not come into play in the nineteenth-century village coalitions and larger hegemonic projects described in chapters 1 and 2. The effective sets of social action were much smaller, sometimes kinship clusters, and often, as we have seen in the case of the village, the groupings of them by agreements and pacts. The village leagues brought together people of different ethnic groups. Villages themselves were often multiethnic. People of different ethnicities intermarried, went to the same marabouts for charms, or sacrificed to the same earth shrine. As a consequence, descent groups, one of the most enduring elements of identity, could be multiethnic. At times, members of a community might be enemies of a neighboring community who spoke the same language as they themselves did, while swearing oaths of mutual assistance with people living far away and who spoke a different language. We have little evidence that there was awareness of a shared overarching ethnicity in the sense that it becomes the topic of anthropological monographs, and the presence of a language bond did not automatically generate solidarity or common interest. When it did, such language-bound solidarity was limited to the most local arena, where acknowledged common origins gave one sector of the community a basis to oppose another sector of it. Ethnicity itself was unstable. The

rubrics used in written descriptions create a false sense of homogeneity. For example, as we explain in chapter 9, the label Marka applies to groups that are very different in the Volta region and in the San valley. People who are Bobo now will tell you that their ancestors hailed from places where different languages are spoken; and a Samo earth shrine custodian can announce that his ancestor was a brother of the founder of that other village that is well known to be Marka. As trained anthropologists, we might perceive in such comments contradiction that needs to be smoothed out, but our local interlocutors are likely not even to understand what causes our problem.

It is possible that even phrasing the issue as shifts and changes in ethnic identity profoundly distorts the reality as it was lived in the nineteenth century. We simply do not know what labels such as Bobo, Marka, or Bwa might have meant at that time, and attempts to smooth over inconsistencies by presuming that some people have dropped out of one of these categories to assume another come out as contrived inferences based on the present. We can be certain that ethnic categories did not cover the social space exhaustively, because at some level this is true even today. There were interstitial cross-ethnic or non-ethnic groups. This was the case, for example, for the Blacksmiths and the bards, the endogamous groups of craft specialists on which there is a vast literature. It was also true for people torn out of their communities. Thus some people were primarily blacksmith, trader (*jula*, written with lowercase), Muslim, or slave; all these are categories in a matrix of reference altogether different from ethnicity. Ethnic categories were not nonoverlapping either. One could be Marka and Samo simultaneously, or Marka and Bwa, as well as Bwa and blacksmith, or Marka and Muslim.

The small bodies of hereditary and endogamous craft groups adapted to different cultural settings without deeply identifying with any one of them and/or/because they were perceived as radically different. In some respects, groups of fighters who joined a farm community were likewise defined primarily by an occupational choice. But when as newcomers they settled into an area, they established affinal links with other people in the community, perhaps engaged in the exchange of shrine offices, and in this way they went through a process of peasantization. Consequently they assumed local ethnic color. Such military groups that had become part of village life, and the fighting traditions they maintained, were essential to the 1915–16 anticolonial movement. Approaching political organization with the conventional lens of ethnicity has had disastrously limiting consequences for scholarship in this historical setting.

The understanding of the Volta-Bani War has suffered from this limitation.

A fixation with ethnicity encouraged a partial view of the conflict. The best-known authors who have written about it did so in studies of particular ethnic groups in the region. It has been called the Bwa Rebellion because the most widely read discussions of the war happened to be lodged in books concerning the Bwa. The Bwa made the largest sacrifices for it, but the movement did not start among the Bwa, and not all Bwa were on the anticolonial side. People of Gurunsi, Marka, Bobo, Sambla, Tusia, Samo, Minyanka, and even Fulbe origin participated on both sides in the war. Volunteers did not participate in the anticolonial movement as members of particular ethnic groups, but only as members of an extended family, a village ward, or a community of allied villages in a restricted area. Linguistic or other cultural boundaries define neither a natural vessel for political organization nor a particular barrier to be crossed. We propose to replace the view of ethnicity with an analysis of nodes of power and of the links between these nodes.

#### INTENTIONS AND STRUCTURES

One of the difficulties in giving an account of such a war is to overcome the overwhelming sense of the unfolding of the inevitable. In addition to the general problems that historiography presents in this regard, we are influenced by many images—both verbal and cinematographic—linked specifically to the African colonial past. What level-headed analysis can totally discard the terrible spectacle of helpless natives mowed down by the fire of a machine gun wielded by a small company of white men wearing tropical helmets? Or the drama of a quasi-medieval army, chanting, wearing turbans, and bearing swords, confronting a self-assured, disciplined company armed with cannons and wearing uniforms? Under the influence of such images, opposition to white rule can be explained only by factors such as the hold of mystical fanaticism, irrational rage, or—in a more sociological parlance—misplaced trust in a “charismatic” leader. Explanations of that type are very far from giving a sense of what happened in the Volta and Bani regions in 1915–16. The misleading images of native helplessness hinder us in the search for the objectives of the anticolonial fighters, in uncovering the cool reasoning with which they carried out the war strategy, and their serene assessments. These images also blind us to the sheer terror that struck the hearts of the French and to the lack of trust that, for most of the conflict period, the colonials had in their own weaponry.

The defeat of the anticolonial movement was not inevitable, at least not on

account of the disparity in the arms technology. The possession of sophisticated rifles was not the main reason for French triumph in the end. The anticolonial fighters took these weapons into account when they planned their strategy, and they succeeded in partly neutralizing the weapons' effect by drawing on superior numbers, tactical resourcefulness, and their spirit of sacrifice. The latter was based on accepting as a given that they would suffer casualties in much greater numbers than their opponent.

The primary goal of this book is to provide an intelligible narrative of this dark episode that brings out the thoughts, intentions, and perceptions of the actors. We try to understand and convey the subjective dispositions of the African actors who were on the anticolonial side by examining the traces of self-expression they have left behind. But we are also interested in the European actors. Historians of colonialism will not find the inclusion of European subjectivities to be a great novelty, but the burgeoning field of colonial anthropology still has not found a totally satisfactory way to balance the two sides of the colonial divide in its interpretations.<sup>10</sup>

We see ourselves as part of a growing contemporary drift that signals itself by the use of the words *agency* and, more recently, *historicity*. Nonetheless, we use these and other fashionable expressions sparingly, because, once their novelty has worn off, they can become clichés, anesthetics that cloak older attitudes, instead of contributing to clarity or imagination. Our commitment is to understanding the events of the past not as enacted cultural scenarios or the instantiation of social positions, but as contingent decisions in response to novel situations. Whatever part “structures” play in these decisions, they do so by shaping the biographies of the actors and their mutual expectations. The actors experience the events in which they participate mostly as strings of intended or meaningful acts, the articulation of which a historical anthropology, as much as history *tout court*, has as its first obligation to recover from the record. By this we mean nothing very mysterious—only that as we try to reconstruct the past we will present the events resurrected from the documents as intelligible; that is, with the minimal requirements to achieve what, in daily human interaction, we mean by the word *understanding*.

By the same token, we also agree that human desires, intentions, and assessments—whether of the past or of the present—are not primary givens; they are grounded in historical and social contexts, the “ghosts of the past generations” that the living bear on their shoulders. Thus we have an ear for the poststructuralists, who announce the illusory character of the subject, as well as for the older sociological traditions that proclaimed the same thing. Human intentions also

emerge in the crossroads of contingencies, conjunctures, as only one of the determinants of—to use an expression popularized in Louis Althusser’s writings—overdetermined outcomes. Finally, purposes and intentions do not constitute the last word of history. It is in the case of very few people, if of any at all, that the future becomes what was intended or desired by those who fashioned it. Still, if a sociocultural event is to be understood, it must be understood first as linked series of intended acts. No talk of charisma, mystical participation, symbolic analysis, or social structural causality can replace this rung in the ladder of comprehension.

In the opening remarks to the account of another war, Marshall Sahlins wrote: “What is generally called ‘event’ is itself complex: at once a *sui generis* phenomenon with its own force, shape and causes, and the significance these qualities acquire in the cultural context” (Sahlins 1991, 45). Revisiting with the optic of an anthropological theory a terrain well explored before by “good historians,” he explains that the decisive actions and subjective dispositions of his actors were relatively autonomous, not simply expressions of the larger system. The structures and relations of higher order do not specify the unique circumstances or individual biographies through which their history is worked out. History needs to be understood as the “synthesis of the heterogeneous,” the intersection of different causal series of events, the coincidence of different chains of determination. Sahlins’s own polemical stress on structure and culture may conceal the profound wisdom in these remarks. We underline his passing remark that notions such as culture and structure are ultimately “evident oversimplification.”

One way to bend these unwieldy notions into more usable instruments is to replace them with memories, sketches, prophesies, all rehearsed, shared, and communicated in narrative form. “Any anthropology that takes seriously the idea of human agency,” says J. D. Y. Peel (1995, 584, 606), “will be concerned with how the narratives-as-lived are shaped by narratives-as-told.” These narratives do not always come in recognizable discursive form; some local traditions are more tight-mouthed when it comes to verbal communication than others. But the kernel of self-understanding is at least implicitly present in the very use of language. We prefer to rest our conceptual apparatus on such self-understanding and resist the temptation to take flights of interpretation without mooring in it.

In the conclusion, we discuss how with this war the populations of the west Volta region and of the Bani valley contributed to the emergence of two separate colonial territories that eventually became the independent nation-states of Mali and Burkina Faso. The agency of African populations in the definition of colonial boundaries is not as frequently debated as the role of different metropolitan interests. More generally, researchers neglect the transitory period that lies between

the initial conquest before the turn of the twentieth century and the high period of colonialism (between the two world wars). Yet this is a time of significant transformation in which one can discern more clearly the agency of segments of the local population and of individual local colonial administrators—more clearly, that is, than in the subsequent period when the institutions and practices had already solidified.

### COLONY, POSTCOLONY, HEGEMONY

In the period following political independence, the historians of Africa wholeheartedly celebrated the anticolonial movements. Soon afterwards, however, a growing awareness of the heterogeneity of precolonial society and of class issues gave these studies a much more sober tone (see Isaacman and Isaacman 1977, 34). At the same time, and independently, a new style of writing on colonial matters was emerging. It possessed literary flair, and it privileged South Asia. In the last decade, this stream of publications established a strong junction with what is often called cultural studies. The publications that place themselves under this sign are now so numerous and varied, and cover so many areas of the world, that it is difficult to say something generally valid about them as a field of research. This flood, perhaps attributable in part to the pressures for conformity in the academic marketplace, now seems to enter the unavoidable ebb phase. We will simply try to identify a few strands in this trend as a reference and counterpoint to the present work.

The influence of Michel Foucault, in books written mostly in the 1960s and documenting in nineteenth-century Europe the development of institutions that invaded and regimented the lives of the citizenry in the name of more humane and efficient organization, is evident in much recent historiography. One also finds a strong imprint of feminist scholarship—for example, that showing homologies between political subordination in the colonies and issues of class and gender in the metropole. A smaller number of studies inspired more directly from Derrida infuse conceptual criticism into sociological studies. One common ground between the studies that show such a wide range of theoretical influences is a particular use of language and an expository style that consists in collating what is thematically incongruous while resisting the urge to establish theoretical or interpretive connections. For the originating authors, the language of irony and wit was tied to an epistemological stance, but it seems now to be emulated

like a fashion, to become the hallmark of what is vaguely called postmodernism. Fredric Jameson (1991, 198) remarked that the moral and political urgency of the earlier models has now given way to a “new stridency . . . combined with celebratory accents,” which for our purposes can be extended to the troubling embrace of the expression *postcolonial* itself. We find that this language and style of montage turn writers away from conceptual effort and precise articulation.

One particular strand in this recent output has a pedigree in the tradition of history writing, which came out of India by way of Australia. This body of work, which is the strongest influence on “postcolonial studies” of our day, was initially known as “subaltern studies,” after the title of a series of yearly volumes that began in 1982. It privileged the study of popular uprisings and less violent kinds of oppositions of the colonial period, taking issue with colonial historiography and also with the anticolonial nationalist history that replaced it. A connection between the resistance studies of the 1960s and this subaltern literature has been established in the comprehensive and sensitive review of Cooper (1994). While the claims to originality are open to debate, we do find ourselves close to some members of this school. G. Bhadra (1988), for example, writes in the conclusion of a study of the Indian mutiny of 1857 these pointed words that could serve as an epigraph for our own study:

The recognition of the strength and weakness of these rebels would be a step forward in understanding their role beyond stereotyped categories and formulae . . . they [cannot] be merely described as faceless elements in an omnibus category called “the people.” To seek after and restore the specific subjectivity of the rebels must be a major task of the new historiography. That would be a recognition of the truth that, under the given historical circumstances in which he lives, man makes himself. (1988, 175)

Inspiration from Antonio Gramsci permeated these works until literary post-structuralism became predominant. But does the increasing frequency of references to this brilliant Italian thinker-activist of the interwar period show that he is a carefully studied source, or simply a dashing accessory to the text? Kurtz (1996) argues that the way *hegemony* is commonly used in recent anthropological writing has little bearing on Gramsci’s subtle concept, while Roseberry (1994) insists that it should not be understood simply as perception, confusion, or indoctrination. The propensity to quote without a close reading of the source is aggravated by indifference to the circumstances under which the work was created.

Gramsci wrote during the time when colonialism was established and consolidated in Africa, but this political reality was not his principal preoccupation. His insights on the elusive nature of hegemony and inconstancy of class were grounded in his revolutionary aspirations, which were at odds with the popular support that the populist Mussolini regime received in Italy. These circumstances of his country were very different from the conditions of colonial domination.

Gramsci confronted the realm of domination by consent, education, mass rallies, and the social engineering of nation building, in contradistinction to the colonial situation of 1915 West Africa, which we assimilate to what Max Weber called *Macht*. Transposing Gramsci's analysis mechanically to early colonial settings would surely be a case of misplaced generalization. A. R. JanMohammed (1985) reasonably proposed to distinguish in colonial history at least two phases: first a "dominant" phase of military subjugation and coercion, and then perhaps a "hegemonic" phase which may involve partly shared representations.<sup>11</sup> Compare this now with the introduction to a collection of essays in anthropological history, in which Nicholas B. Dirks (1992) presents a seamless colonial hegemony as simultaneous consent and resistance. Gramscian concepts are hybridized with the inconsonant notion of culture, and the distinction made by JanMohammed disappears from view. We risk being dazzled with a homogeneous category of colonialism, where resistance becomes a faintly perceptible space both within and against colonial culture. The 1915–16 resistance in the Volta, in contrast, belonged to a period of juncture, a "heterogeneity" in its full sense. Fledgling colonialism disrupted many people's everyday life, but still functioned outside of it. People's cultural vision and political project were not molded by those of colonialism.

The word *subaltern* inspires in us a commentary that is parallel to the one we made on *rebellion*, above. For the first decades of colonial occupation, subaltern is improper as a collective designation for West Africans in opposition to Europeans. There were undoubtedly subalterns among the Africans, as there were among the Europeans, and we will elaborate upon this in various parts of our account. But the conquering armies led by Europeans found themselves up against armies led by Africans who saw themselves as the Europeans' equal, if not their superiors, even though they had to take account of great differences in armament. The local people did not assimilate the colonial occupation as subjugation, and in fact this occupation was very tenuous, as explained in later chapters. The violent encounter that generated colonialism in West Africa was as complicated a social phenomenon as the class processes of early-twentieth-century Europe, but it was so in different ways, and we should not overlook the differences.

## THE VOLTA-BANI WAR IN HISTORIOGRAPHIC DISCOURSE

The postindependence period in Africa was a time for valorizing the anticolonial struggles of the past, and such projects absorbed most people writing in the developing field of African history at that time. Reflecting this climate of opinion, Asiwaju and Crowder wrote (1977, 2): “Armed confrontation with colonial rulers . . . is perhaps the best studied aspect of protest against colonial rule, no doubt because of its greater dramatic appeal.” Eventually, historians began protesting against the fixation with large-scale risings at the expense of smaller-scale oppositions and other forms of protest (for example Tosh 1974). We seem to have come now full circle. The tide has turned, and we hear complaints that there is too much “small” opposition, too much “passive resistance” or protest by semiotic detour, at the expense of what was dramatic and what needs to be told first. The general knowledge of large-scale West African oppositions to colonial rule is still sketchy, and largely dependent on random factors leading to the production of theses and books in this or that part of the West African subcontinent. New fads in scholarly writing, focusing on colonial discourse rather than on organization and confrontation, may be taking us further away from filling the gaps.

In our case, we have even more compelling reasons to return to the “large-scale.” The 1915–16 Volta-Bani War was a seismic event in West African colonial history, but it remains virtually unknown in the English-language literature. In a journal intended for use in African colleges and universities, a 1977 survey article entitled “West African Revolts during the First World War” mentions the 1915–16 Volta-Bani War only with the laconic phrase “revolts against forced recruitment in . . . Dédougou, Bobo-Dioulasso, Ouagadougou in the Upper Volta” (Osuntokun 1977, 10). The same issue of the journal includes an article on the much smaller-scale uprising in the Borgu districts of French Dahomey. The landmark volume edited by Rotberg and Mazrui (1970) makes no mention of the Volta-Bani War, neither in its introduction nor in the sections “Resistance to Conquest” and “Rebellions.” Sixteen years later, the introduction to another landmark volume, edited by D. Crummey (1986), makes no reference to it either. We note that the Volta-Bani War is not the only blind spot in this literature. Also missing from the surveys are the Baule wars, in what is now central Côte d’Ivoire (Weiskel 1980; Chauveau 1987), and the other serious military challenges that shook the French colonial administration between 1916 and 1918, first in the area of the current Burkina-Niger border and then in the Ahaggar region of the central Sahara.<sup>12</sup> It is as if in the pages of history books the thousands of anticolonial

fighters of the Volta-Bani War and of these other struggles have fallen victim once again, this time to the invisible language barrier between French and English that still divides postcolonial Africa.

The literature by French scholars, however, also lacks mention of the Volta-Bani War, when one looks beyond the small circle of specialists of Mali and Burkina Faso. An illustration is the authoritative synthesis of African history by Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch (1988), which has one chapter entitled "State Resistance" and another, some forty pages long, entitled "Revolt and Resistance." The "violent revolt . . . in Western Volta" is mentioned, in half a sentence, as a "local peasant revolt" in reaction to forced conscription in West Africa, whereas the Maji-Maji in Tanganyika (1905–7), the Kongo Warra war in Central Africa (1927–32), the Mau Mau uprising of Kenya (1952–56), and the 1964–65 rebellions in Zaïre are described as "Mass Movements." In terms of scale only, going by the numbers provided by the author, the Volta-Bani War was by far more massive than any of these other movements. The text reports 12,000 deaths in the Maji-Maji conflict and perhaps 10,000 in the Mau Mau; this is about one-third the number of those who fell in the Volta-Bani War. More than 350,000 are said to have participated in the Kongo-Warra war. This is again about one-third of those who participated in the Volta-Bani War. We are aware that caution is needed in a simple comparison of numbers; one finds different estimates in different books, and it is not always clear what is being counted. Our figures for the Volta-Bani War deaths are conservative estimates that include only those who fell in the battlefield, and participation was measured on the basis of the colonial census figures of the cantons and cercles in question. The point is not to decide, once and for all, which was the most murderous anticolonial war in Africa; on the contrary, we suggest that comparative statements about the scale of these movements are necessarily provisional, because there is simply too much that has not been written about. With all that, still, the conclusion of the author that "West Africa . . . never in the twentieth century underwent large-scale peasant revolts comparable to those in Central and East Africa" (1988, 205) is certainly very rash, even in light of what has already been published.

One reason the Volta-Bani War is so little known in the scholarly literature is the attitudes of successive governments that ruled over these territories. First the attitude of the French colonial government: Because the Volta-Bani movement occurred during World War I, and had in fact its genesis in the conditions of that larger war (as we explain in chap. 4), the French government kept secret what happened in that part of their colonial empire, from their own public as

well as from the rest of world. This was the time of strong Allied propaganda against Germany. The German territories in Africa were attacked and taken over by joint British and French forces, with the loud justification that Germany was unfit for the “civilizing mission,” atrocities in the suppression of the South West Africa and Tanganyika insurrections being given as evidence. Any news about trouble in their own territories would expose both Britain and France to the charge of self-righteous hypocrisy. France especially had good reason to fear exposure. The violence in the suppression of the Volta-Bani opposition probably surpassed German actions in either of the above-mentioned conflicts.<sup>13</sup>

A lecture by Albert Lebrun, deputy and former minister of colonies, delivered in Toulouse in June 1916, the most violent moment of the Volta-Bani War in all its fronts, illustrates the point. His speech was entitled “The Colonial French Effort.” In it he declared that the colonies of France “in complete unanimity . . . have all sided with the metropole,” and he listed all the loyalist manifestations coming from Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, and Indochina. He did acknowledge “some attempts at local rebellion,” but these were not significant either in their causes or in their effects. “France should be legitimately proud,” he concluded, “of the support that all her subjects have given her” (Kaspi 1971, 381). Thus what was a “repression effort without precedent,” according to the panic-stricken governor-general in Dakar, was downgraded to an attempt at local rebellion by the politicians in Paris.

The second moment in the perpetuation of the amnesia on the Volta-Bani War was 1960, the year of independence for French colonies. The team that took Upper Volta to independence, unlike some of its counterparts elsewhere in Africa, was not consumed with anticolonial fervor. These Roman Catholic mission-trained intellectuals were not all of the same mind or supportive of each other, but they were deferential to France. The Volta-Bani War did not come to the front stage of national consciousness under the politicians of the first two decades of independence. The situation was not exactly the same in Mali, the second nation-state that partakes of the heritage of this movement. But both in Mali and Upper Volta (the former Burkina Faso), the Volta-Bani anticolonial war concerned areas that were marginal in terms of the symbols mobilized to forge a national identity: ancient Mali and the heritage of the Bambara of the middle course of the Niger, in the first case, and the Mose kingdoms, in the second. In fact, in both countries large numbers of people who identified strongly with this national identity came from places that participated on the side of the French in the repression of 1916. At the same time, the local authors who wrote about the war all identified strongly with the populations that became minorities in their

respective nation-states, and in their literary efforts there was a stance of opposition to the nucleus that controlled the new states. Even today, people may read a tinge of regionalist subversion in glorifying the opposition of 1915–16.

We should add that among the populations of the villages that participated in the anticolonial movement and were decimated by the repression, the memory of it today is not necessarily a reason for jubilation. The descendants of particular famous leaders may betray a discrete pride in their family association, but the more widespread recollection of the war is that of a tragic disaster or an error of catastrophic proportion. It is also common to encounter a reticence to remember the war at all.

This attitude has complicated roots. The memory of the expectations with which people participated in the movement at the time is hard to preserve after the brutality of what actually transpired. The celebratory outlook of the movement and the persisting disillusionment among its participants' descendants today are linked by a view of human agency that stresses efficacy in the world and leaves little room for the brooding contemplation of martyrdom. An intervening factor is the current hold that the notion of progress has in the hearts and minds of the local people. It strengthens the ambition for personal success and breeds further contempt for failure. At another level, the local attitude toward the memory of the anticolonial war perdures because of the indifference of successive regimes to raise this event into a positive moment of the national past.

To return to the world of the script, for the reasons we explained the Volta-Bani War remained buried in military reports and administrative documents for many years. It is through military history, albeit the type that eulogizes the officers of the colonial army, that the war made its way to print. Colonel Mangeot's training manual (1922), written for the colonial officers, includes illustrative references to the Molard campaign. A history prepared for the 1931 Colonial Fair in Paris gives a brief description of the war.<sup>14</sup> A longer description, which is obviously based on military field reports, is found in General Duboc's history of the French conquest of West Africa (1938).

An article written by a schoolteacher, Ibrahima Maiga (1937), from what is now Mali, on the battle of Tominian, has a different character, because it includes local stories and memories. This is the earliest piece we have seen on any episode of the war written by a member of the local intelligentsia. But it was published in one of those colonial journals that encouraged the literary output of young African educators and it does not make a break with the perspective of the government. After this article comes a long silence, and then the first literary and scholarly references begin in the years following independence.

The first work on the Volta-Bani movement in postindependence times, and probably the most influential of all, was published in 1962 by an outstanding Burkinabe writer, Nazi Boni, while he was in self-imposed exile in Dakar and. Boni was a Bwa, and his rich and evocative book, which is part fiction and part chronicle, is set in the Niengue region.<sup>15</sup> Boni's novel inspired most of the authors mentioned below, and we should mention that the anticolonial movement of the west Volta and Bani regions came to be known under the misleading name of the Bwa rebellion largely due to the influence of this work.

Among the historians of recent times, Jean Suret-Canale has precedence in drawing attention to the significance of the Volta-Bani War as an anticolonial movement. In a book that is the first critical reappraisal of colonialism in French West Africa by a historian, he lists it among the resistances to the colonial administration during the years of World War I (Suret-Canale 1964). In a footnote, he states that he is preparing a separate book on the subject, but unfortunately this project seems not to have come to fruition. The main source that made the movement known to French West Africanists was the acclaimed Bwa ethnography of Jean Capron (1973), circulated and quoted as a mimeographed thesis before the printed version. The section on the anticolonial war was part of the introductory chapter dealing with the history of the San region, and it provided the first synthesis of ethnographic observation and a few difficult-to-find local publications on the topic.

Two local studies of the Volta-Bani War were published in 1970 in the same issue of the journal of the National Research Center in Ouagadougou. One of them was the text of a graduation thesis for the National School of Administration written by Blami Gnankambary (1970), a Bwa professional. It combined data from archival documents from the cercle of Dedougou with information obtained from oral sources in the Bwa villages within the bend of the Muhun River. The second article was by Father Jean Hébert (1970), who also published many other pieces on Voltaic history. Although very important for their time and a primary source for many later studies, caution is advised while reading these two articles. Neither of them provides references. Father Hébert's piece incorporates unacknowledged long quotes and paraphrases from official documents, without warning for qualifications that might be introduced on the basis of other documents of the period. Gnankambary's thesis harbors also a few errors, which seem mostly to have been introduced at the typing stage, but which may disorient readers unfamiliar with the setting. Some of the small inaccuracies in these two publications have found their way to many other publications that have relied on them. Another *maîtrise* thesis, longer than Hébert's and

Gnankambary's articles, was written in France by Pascal Toe (1970). It relies heavily on the two important reports that were produced by Jules Vidal and Edouard Picanon, inspectors of the colonial administration, before the heat of the events had dissipated. It shares the flaws of unacknowledged references and uncritical copying, but of the sources mentioned here it includes the most comprehensive event history. Another National School of Administration thesis remained as a typescript, largely unknown. Written by Siaka Sombie (1975), the narrative of this text seems to be based on the diary of the administrator of Dedougou, as well as on the thesis of Gnankambary, but it also includes significant small details from oral sources, which bring out the role of the Marka leadership of Bona in the organization of the movement.<sup>16</sup>

The chapters in the books that two French historians published in the 1980s are more solidly bedecked with scholarly apparatus. The first, by Marc Michel (1982), on the topic of military conscription in French West Africa, includes a chapter on the West Volta War based on a wider range of archival and oral sources. The second book, Anne-Marie Duperray's historical monograph on the Gurunsi (1984), broadened the understanding of the movement outside of the bend of the Muhun River.

We are not surveying here all the more recent work that contains some discussion of the events we write about below, but we will mention two unusual efforts. Lazoumou Seni published a small pamphlet in a government press in Burkina Faso in the years of Thomas Sankara's revolutionary government and a separate brief article elsewhere; both works are based on a longer manuscript (Seni 1981 and 1985). The second recent source is a booklet printed in Jula in the adult-literacy series of the rural-development extension services of Bobo-Dioulasso and Dedougou, produced by a team that made use of a few of the sources mentioned above, adding some new oral narratives that they collected in villages (Bobo Julaso ni Dedugu Serepeya 1995). The booklet, which is distributed in the villages, is the only published source on the war accessible to young farmers who are literate in Jula.

## OUR SOURCES

Our sources for most of the events as well as the ideas guiding the action of the protagonists include colonial documents, field reports of the officers, letters and justificatory texts by the administrators, and a few more encompassing general documents commissioned by the government. The research was mostly carried

out in archives in France (Aix-en-Provence and Paris) and, secondarily, in Burkina Faso and Abidjan (see archival sources). Moussa Niakate provided a service to the scholarly community by making available an important collection of documents from the archives of Bamako.<sup>17</sup> On the African side there are memories, stories, comments, and attitudes, most of which are recorded in the local sources we mentioned above. They do not add up in volume to the mountains of colonial paperwork, nor are they of a nature to allow for a direct comparison. In addition, this book's two authors have separately conducted long stretches of fieldwork, mostly in areas of the former cercle of Bobo-Dioulasso, even though much of it was not directly focused on the 1915–16 war. During the writing of the book, one of the authors also conducted a rapid survey on the memories of the war in the former cercle of Dedougou. It is the essence of the labor of historical interpretation to tread through this uneven material.

The colonial documents, we would like to point out, are not univocal. The mass of archival material presents a diversity of information and points of view that is unsuspected before engaging in its study. We owe this to the sheer number of people who wrote the documents, the different motivations for producing them, and the disagreements and conflicts among the colonial personnel. Archival materials are far from representing a "colonial mind" that can be distilled easily. The colonial records also include direct and indirect voices of African protagonists, as depositions, observations, and as arguments used by different colonial parties to support controversial points. We strive to undo the stereotypical colonial actor as we do that of the native or the anticolonial partisan. We hope that our study, based in extensive fieldwork and archival research, will strengthen the growing ties between anthropology and history by encouraging the combining of the work methods of the two disciplines.