

أسطورة "بيدا" إله مملكة واغادو (غانا القديمة – من القرن 2 إلى القرن 11 م-)

The Myth of Bida God of the Kingdom of Wagadu (Ancient Ghana 2nd – 11th Centuries AD)

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ملخص:	معلومات المقال
<p>تمثل الاساطير والحكايات الشعبية جزءا من تراث هذه الشعوب ومن أهم المصادر التي ترسم تاريخ وجودها منذ نشأتها إلى زوالها، ولعل اسطورة بيدا، الثعبان الإله، بمملكة واغادو احد ابرز الأمثلة التي تصور لنا تاريخ قبائل السوننكي ومملكة واغادو منذ نشأتها في القرن الثاني للميلاد حتى سقوطها بداية القرن الحادي عشر للميلاد. ملخص الاسطورة يتمثل في تقديم أجمل عذراء قربانا للإله بيدا كل سنة مقابل ضمانه لوفرة المطر ووفرة الذهب بالمملكة، واستمر الحال على هذا المنوال لقرون عدة، الى عهد الملك كايا ماغان عندما وقع اختيار مملكة جمال واغادو على العذراء سيا خطيبة الفارس مامادي الذي رفض قرار الكهنة، وبعد مقاومته لجيش المملكة بكامله ووصوله للغابة التي يسكن بها الإله بيدا ليخلص خطيبته، اكتشف أمراً صادما لم يكن يحظر على بال احد في المملكة باستثناء الكهنة. سنحاول من خلال هذه الورقة البحثية تسليط الضوء على هذه الاسطورة، بالتركيز على شخصياتها والمتمثلة، في حلقتها الاولى، في الملك دينغا، بيدا الثعبان الإله والجني ملك منطقة نايورو والعلاقة التي تربط بينهم. في الحلقة الثانية من الاسطورة تدخل عناصر جديدة في المشهد، فبالإضافة للملك الذي صار يلقب ب "كايا ماغان" في آخر أيام المملكة والإله بيدا، يدخل الكهنة، العذراء سيا ملكة جمال واغادو وخطيبها ويدعي مامادي والدرويش كرفا.</p>	<p><u>تاريخ الإرسال</u> 2022/05/01</p> <p><u>تاريخ القبول</u> 2022/06/30</p> <p><u>الكلمات المفتاحية:</u> مملكة واغادو؛ غانا القديمة؛ الإله بيدا؛ سيا ياتاباري؛ كايا ماغان.</p>
Abstract:	Article info

The myth of Bida, the python, God of the kingdom of Wagadu in ancient Ghana, is one of the prominent examples depicting the history of the Soninke tribes and the kingdom of Wagadu from its emergence in the second century until its decline by the beginning of the eleventh century, and this was before the advent of Christianity and Islam therein. The people of Wagadu used to sacrifice the most beautiful virgin in the kingdom to God Bida, the python every year in exchange for ensuring the abundance of rain and the abundance of gold in the Kingdom. This situation lasted for centuries, until the reign of King Kaya Maghan when the choice of Miss Wagadu, the virgin fell on Sia, the fiancée of Mamadi, who rejected the decision of the priests. After resisting the kingdom's entire army to save his fiancée, he arrived in the forest where God Bida lived, he discovered a shocking thing that no one in the kingdom had in mind except the priests. The paper will focus on the characters of this myth in its first episode, that is, King Dinga, Bida the python (God) and the spirit (the king of the region of Nairo). In the second episode of the myth, new characters entered the scene, together with the king who became nicknamed “Kaya Maghan”, the priests, the virgin Sia Yatabaré (Miss Wagadu), Mamadi (fiancé of Sia) and Kerfa.

Received:
2022/05/01
Accepted:
2022/06/30

Key words:
Kingdom of
Wagadu;
Ancient Gahana;
The God Bida;
Sia Yatabaré;
Kaya Maghan.

1. Introduction

This paper deals with one of the most exciting legends in ancient West African kingdoms, the legend of Bida, the python, God of rain and gold in the kingdom of Wagadu. The research is divided into five sections. The second section is devoted to the location of the Empire of Ghana and the different versions on the origins of its name while the third section examines the religious beliefs of the people of the Empire. The fourth section explores the legend of Bida through the writings of some authors like David Conrad, Stephen Belcher and Levtzion Nehemiah. Sub-section two in section four summarizes the events of the film of “Sia the Dream of the Python” which had a shocking end that revealed

the serious secret on which the Empire of Ghana had been established.

2. Location and Origins of the Empire of Ghana

2.1. Location

The Ancient Empire of Ghana, also called Wagadu was located in West Africa. It covered parts of modern Mauritania and Mali, and it shared limit mostly with the Senegal River, in the southwest. To the East the Empire of Ghana was bordered by the Niger River Basin and the legendary city of Timbuktu. Its capital was Kumbi Saleh located between the northern bend of the Niger River to the east and the Headwaters of the Senegal River to the west.¹ According to Al-Bakri, Kumbi Saleh was divided into two separate towns; one for the black pagans called *el-Ghaba*, an Arabic word meaning ‘forest’, it contained a mosque for both the blacks converted into Islam and the Muslim visitor merchants. The other town was located at about six miles away from the pagan headquarters. It was inhabited by Muslims,² and it contained a dozen of mosques with imams, muezzins and jurisprudents in addition to many houses and markets reflecting the architectural character of the Islamic civilization.³

2.2. Origins

Defining precisely the origins of the ancient empire of Ghana is hard and complex at the same time. According to the first writings about the Empire of Ghana, especially *Tarikh al-Fattash* by Mahmoud Ka't, and *Tarikh Es-Sudan* by Abdulrahman Es-Saadi, the ancient Empire of Ghana might have existed few centuries before the Muslim Hegira. The first

mention of the Empire of Ghana is found in the works of the astronomer El-Fezzari just before 800 A.D.⁴ However, according to Fage, the first time the ancient Empire of Ghana was mentioned in written history goes back to 773 A.D., when the geographer al-Mas'udi referred to the empire as the 'Land of Gold'.⁵

2.2.1. Concerning the name of Ghana, there exist different hypotheses as to the origin of this name. The first hypothesis is introduced by El-Bakri, who argues that the name of Ghana is the title given to the kings, and it means "Chief of War"⁶. The idea that 'Ghana' refers to the title of the kings of this empire is mentioned by Zabadia in his book 'The Kingdom of Songhai under the dynasty of the Askias', he states: "The Name of Ghana itself referred neither to the Empire as a geographical entity nor to its capital, but it referred to the title of the kings in the hierarchy of authority."⁷

2.2.2. The second hypothesis says that the name of Ghana is derived from the Arabic adjective *ghanna*' with a geminated 'n' meaning beautiful. The first Arabs who arrived there described the town as a beautiful forest, which means in Arabic *ghaba ghanna*' and by time, the word *ghaba* was omitted while the adjective *ghanna*' was kept, and for linguistic considerations, it changed into Ghana.⁸ It is also believed that the empire derives its name from the name of the chief of the invaders, Maghan Diabe Cissé. However, this seems to be hard to justify by merely linguistic evolution, that is, to accept that Maghan changed into Ghana. David Conrad, on the other hand, argues that visitors from North Africa gave the name of Ghana to the Soninké State but the Soninké

themselves and the Mande people called the ancient kingdom Wagadu, a contracted form of Wagadugu.⁹

2.2.3. The third hypothesis says that the location was first called ‘Wagadu’ meaning the Land of the Wago. The Wago refers to an aristocratic clan whose leader was known as Ghana, which means ‘the Chief’ in Soninké. The name of the kingdom of Wagadu would, through time, be turned into the title of their leader.¹⁰ This hypothesis seems to have much in common with the interpretations of al-Bakri and Zabadia which had already been mentioned. The last hypothesis concerning the name of Ghana confirms that it is derived from the Arabic word ‘*el-ghina*’ meaning richness, this name was given by visitors from North Africa to refer to the richness of that land, and for linguistic considerations, the word ‘*el-ghina*’ changed into Ghana.¹¹

3. Religions and Beliefs

Most of the people in ancient Ghana were pagans, they used to worship idols. After the arrival of the north African Muslim merchants, some local people converted into Islam. In fact, the capital Kumbi Saleh was divided into two towns, one inhabited by the Muslim population and contained a dozen mosques where distinguished jurists gathered; the other known as *al-Ghaba* inhabited by the pagans.¹²

3.1. Islam in the Kingdom of Wagadu

Islam arrived in West Africa in a slow peaceful process. Muslim traders and scholars gradually spread Islam by the early journeys across the Sahara. Goods from Europe and north Africa passed through chains of Muslim traders to be

sold in the trade centres in West Africa.¹³ "The city of Kumbi Saheh consists of two towns, one inhabited by Muslims, it possesses twelve mosques in one of which they assemble for the Friday congregation. There were salaried imams and muezzins, as well as jurists and scholars¹⁴. There was also a mosque in the town of the King close to the court where the Muslim officials and visitors used to perform their religious rituals.¹⁵ Amongst the Muslim officials there were the vizier, the treasurer and the head of the Cabinet.¹⁶

3.2. Local Beliefs

Most of the local people in Wagadu were pagans, they used to worship different gods including fire, water, animals, etc., by the way, the officials and most of the inhabitants of the kingdom used to worship a python, the guardian of *al-Ghaba*. Orally transmitted legend shows, when Diabé Cissé and his people left Diarra, the former capital of the kingdom, they settled in a new location (Kumbi Saleh) which was controlled by a python with seven heads, called Bida. The python made an agreement with the king of the Soninké, under which Diabe Cissé and his people would be allowed to settle in *al-Ghaba*, and offer an annual sacrifice represented in the most beautiful virgin in the kingdom, in return Bida would guarantee rainfall and abundant gold. This agreement between Bida the guardian of *al-Ghaba* and the kings of Wagadu (Ancient Empire of Ghana) lasted for more than three centuries. Throughout this period, the Soninke used to sacrifice the most beautiful virgin in the kingdom in solemn annual religious rituals until the year the Python was killed.

4. The Myth of Bida God of Wagadu

4.1. The First Version of the Myth of Bida

This version is based on the writings of Delafosse, Levtzion and Conrad on the myth of Bida, God of *al-Ghaba* in Kumbi Saleh. According to these writings, the first king of Wagadu is said to be Dinga son of Khiridion Tamaganké, son of Yougo Doumbessé, son of Job, son of Salomon son of David (Peace Be Upon Him), he came from the Levant with his companions and three hundred magicians.¹⁷ He arrived at a location called Kumbi where he found a young woman drawing water from a well. He asked her for some water, but she did not want to give him any. He hit her angrily, and she called out to the spirit of the well; the female spirit came out and demanded to know who had hit her daughter. She found that Dinga was responsible for hitting her daughter, she cast a spell on him, paralyzing her. But Dinga used his magic to do the same to her. After a long battle of magic, Dinga managed to subdue the spirit.

They came to an agreement, whereby Dinga would marry all of the three spirit's daughters. The eldest (of the daughters) was not a human, but a Bida serpent, a great snake with a mane that took refuge in the well.

As Dinga gets old, he entrusted to his son Khiné the secret of bringing rain. His other son, Diabe, learned that he was to inherit the kingdom of Kumbi. Djabe had to feed a vulture and a hyena for 40 days with the heart and liver of a

young colt, in order to learn how to find his way to Kumbi. According to Levtzion, Diabe outwitted Khiné and obtained his father's blessing and power and fled to find refuge in the bush.¹⁸ In a version by David Conrad, Dinga grew old and blind when he decided to pass his magic power to his son Khiné. But a younger son named Diabe Cissé distinguished himself as the senior brother and deceived his father into giving him the chiefly powers.¹⁹

When Diabe got to Kumbi, he found the well and the Bida serpent in it. Diabe says he is to become the kingdom of Kumbi, but the serpent says that he is the ruler of Kumbi. So Diabe had to strike a bargain with him. Diabe would become king, but the serpent would get the sacrifice of one maiden and one horse every year. In return, the serpent promised an annual rain of gold to make the kingdom rich.

For many years the Soninké people used to believe that the python Bida, the God, was responsible for their prosperity and welfare in return for offering him the most beautiful virgin in the kingdom. But while one of the maidens chosen for the sacrifice, was awaiting the act, her fiancé rode up and cut the serpent's head off. The serpent let out a curse as it died: there would be seven years of drought, and the end of the rain of gold. So the prosperity of the land was ended.²⁰

4.2. The Second Version of the Myth of Bida

The second version of the myth of Bida is based on the events of the film of 'Sia the Dream of the Python', a film directed by Dani Kouyaté, produced in 2001. The story of Sia Yattabaré and the python Bida involves four main characters,

Kerfa, the madman, Sia, the virgin, Mamadi, the fiancé of Sia, Wakané, the uncle of Mamadi and the Chief of the army. When Diabe Cissé, son of Dinga, left Diara, he settled in Kumbi Saleh. He found that Kumbi Saleh was controlled by a python with seven heads. The latter allowed Diabe Cissé to settle in Kumbi Saleh under a condition. The condition which consisted in offering Bida the most beautiful virgin in the kingdom in an annual ritual, in return, Bida would guarantee rainfall and abundant gold. The bond of the alliance became an annual ritual celebrated by the Soninké from their settlement in Kumbi Salaeh, the capital of Wagadu until the killing of the Bida and the collapse of the kingdom of Wagadu.

According to the film of “Sia the Dream of the Python”, there was a madman (*darwish*) called Kerfa who always predicted the future events. He used to walk in streets telling people his predictions, but nobody took his sayings into consideration. Kerfa was talking about the close decline of the kingdom of Wagadu under the reign of Kaya Maghan. During the same year, the choice of the most beautiful young virgin fell on, Mamadi’s fiancé, Sia Yatabaré, a brave man in the king’s army. The decision was taken by the court, but Mamadi’s uncle, Wakané, who was the chief commander of the army rejected this decision because Sia had already been promised to his nephew, Mamadi. Wakané entered in a conflict with the members of the court. The king intervened to settle the conflict between the members of the court and the chief commander of his army, and called for the respect of the decision of the court for the goodness of the kingdom. Sia’s father accepted the decision of the court, and he said: “If the future of the kingdom depends on the sacrifice of my daughter,

I accept.” However, her mother wailed and wept saying: “I strongly refuse to sacrifice my daughter.” Sia ran away from home to hide in a hut outside the city at the madman Kerfa. The soldiers and the guard of the king spent days searching for Sia until she was captured and taken to the court.

Sia was prepared like a bridegroom in solemn rituals to be taken to the python. Mamadi decided to save his fiancée from the python at all costs. He took his sword, mounted his horse and headed quickly to *al-ghaba*. When he reached the cave where the python was thought to live in, he found a big surprise. There was no python, it was a big lie in which the people of Wagadu had believed for many years! He found the seven priests sorcerers; the advisors of the king and they had raped his fiancée Sia who was in a dire state. He also found human beings’ bones believed to belong to the virgins who were used to be killed after being raped. Mamadi was shocked by the horror of what he saw, with a rage of anger, he killed the seven sorcerers and rescued Sia. It is believed that the killing of the king’s advisors plunged the kingdom into chaos leading to its decline.²¹

5. Conclusion

The main idea that can be concluded from the legend of Bida, the God of rain and gold in the kingdom of Wagadu, is the use of the religious beliefs for political purposes. Often these beliefs are built on lies and superstition as is the case with the story of Bida. For more than three centuries, the people of Wagadu used to sacrifice the most beautiful young virgin to Bida because they believed that their lives and prosperity were under his control. However, the events of the

film of ‘Sia Yatabaré the Dream of the Python’ revealed that the people of Wagadu had lived on a lie that lasted for more than three centuries. Actually, the story of the python was a big lie, but no one dared to reveal the secret. The python with seven heads, in fact, was represented by seven sorcerers working in the court as advisors of the king.

Endnotes

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² Eva L. R. Meyerowitz, A Note on the Origins of Ghana, African Affairs, Vol.51, N° 205, (October 1952), p.319

³ Tahar Abbou, The Origins of the Empire of Ghana, El-Hakika, Numero 22, Septembre 2012, p.6

⁴ Raymond Mauny, Kumbi Saleh : Capital of the ‘Land of Gold’, The UNESCO Courier, N° 10, October 1959, p.24

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⁷ زبادية، نفس المرجع، ص. 17

⁸ The phenomenon of dropping the noun and keeping the adjective in toponymy is common. For example, the name of Labiadh Sid Cheikh in the southwest of Algeria comes from el-Bir Labiadh, an Arabic compound meaning the White Well. After his death, Sid Cheikh, the founder of the Chikhiya brotherhood, was buried there and since then the noun ‘well’ was dropped, and the adjective ‘white’ was combined with Sid Cheikh to become Labiadh Sid Cheikh. Source: Tahar Abbou, The Pilgrimage to the Mausoleum of Sidi Shaykh, in The Many Voices of Pilgrimage and Reconciliation, Edited by Ian S. MacIntosh and Lesley D. Harman, CABI International, Oxford, 2017, p.168

⁹ David C. Conrad, Empires of Medieval West Africa, Beth Adelman, New York, 2005, p.17

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