The Neolithic Facies of the Baoule, Mali

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The rock-shelter Fanfannygène I (13°45'39" N/9°14'05" W) is formed of a monolithic block of sandstone, undercut by erosion to such an extent that today it is supported by three pillars, thus providing a covered living area of around 381 m². The excavation (a rectangular area of 3 m²) by levels of an arbitrary thickness of 5 cm, revealed a stratigraphy of seven distinct layers and yielded very abundant archaeological material, 1296 potsherds, 2813 stone artefacts and 114094 stone flakes. The reassembly of stone material made it possible to determine the reduction process in some layers.

The stone artefacts, mostly fashioned from a siliceous raw material, include five groups of principal tools:

- Geometric stone industry (26.3%; Fig. 1, #2 to 12), of varied shapes (twenty-five types recognized) characterized mainly by lunates with continuous backed retouch either direct (18.7%) or bifacial (2.4%) as well as triangles with continuous backed direct retouch (1.1%).

- Retouched flakes of different types (20.8%; Fig. 1, #16)

- Various tools obtained by laminar reduction (16.4%) which can be subdivided into bladelets (8%; Fig. 1, #15), blades (4.4%; Fig. 1, #14) and micro-bladelets (4%; Fig. 1, #20).

- Krukowski microburins (8.1%; Fig. 1, #25) whose significance is still debatable, associated with spalls of bladelets with straight oblique truncation (1%; Fig. 1, #23).

- "Mèches de foret" (2.2%; Fig. 1, #17, 21) single or double and borers (1.2%; Fig. 1, #22).

Besides these five major groups, four types of tools are represented at less than 1%:

- Transversal arrowhead (0.6%; Fig. 1, #18); microtranchets (0.6%; Fig. 1, #26); scrapers (0.4%; Fig. 1, #13); burins (0.2%; Fig. 1, #24).

Three final types occur rarely, under 0.2%: celt (four examples); an unusual
point made up of bladelets finely sharpened by retouch totally or partially bifacial (four examples; Fig. 1, #19); microburins (two examples).

Several handstones and fragments of milling stones were discovered, as well as a mortar.

The total lack of sharp-pointed arrowheads is noteworthy. Considering the quantity of tools discovered at Fanfannyegene I, as on all neighbouring sites, and taking into account the bone remains that imply hunting, it can be suggested that this lack cannot be explained on functional grounds but is a significant cultural feature.

It should also be noted that many small polished and shaped sticks of hematite were found. These may have been used to produce the numerous rock paintings found in the shelter, representing primarily saurians and geometrical patterns. The paintings are superimposed by hammered rock-drawings showing stylised animals.

Fig. 1. Stone industry and terracotta head from Fanfannyegene I.
The ceramics are quite homogeneous: the vessels have simple forms, spherical bodies, and bases which were very probably rounded. The lips are barely pronounced. Certain potsherds have holes made after firing which could have been used to suspend the vessels.

Of the potsherds, 65.8% are decorated. In most cases, this decoration was obtained by impressions with a "walking comb" (70%). The use of the roulette seems frequent, with the aid of either a carved roulette (11%) or a "peigne filet souple" (5.3%). This last tool was also used to produce a parallel imprint (4.6%). Stabbed patterns are also well represented (5.5%). Traces of burnishing or polishing (18% of potsherds) suggest a relatively careful finishing. Evidence of coils is present.

Finally a highly stylised statuette bears witness to a certain form of plastic art (Fig. 1, #1).

The composition of this material does not seem to have been constant through time. The study of archaeological material in different levels shows, in fact, an evolution in the ratio of certain key objects. This progression is gradual and without breaks. This suggests a partial and gradual change of culture as witnessed by its artefacts, rather than a series of distinct traditions. Thus, for example in the case of the stone artefacts, a very clear change can be observed in the ratio geometric stone took laminar forms which evolve from 0%/100% at the lowest level to 90.9%/9.1% at the surface.

With regard to the nature of human use of the rock-shelter, the abundance of archaeological material and the absence of barren levels in the stratigraphy confirm its regular usage. However the flooding of the dig after a rain suggests that the occupation was probably interrupted during the rainy season. In addition, the large number of potsherds, which implies an extensive use of ceramics contrary to the habits of present day hunters or nomads, suggests a relatively sedentary way of life. The semi-sedentary nature of the occupation is supported by the high number of handstones and fragments of lower milling stones, utensils which are difficult to transport. Bowl-shaped fireplaces of 50 to 60 cm in diameter were scraped out and sometimes enclosed with stone blocks. One of these occurs near a rubbish heap. The above-mentioned mortar was installed on the edge of one of these fireplaces by means of locking stones.

Finally, areas with stones of irregular slope indicate corridors.

Besides the grinding of gathered foodstuffs (no direct proof for agriculture was unearthed), one of the principal economic activities would seem to have been the manufacture of stone artefacts. The raw materials for these stone tools were brought from quite far. Two possible sources were located during the survey at 28 and 27 km from Fanfannyegne I. It seems, however, that the majority of rocks used came from veins even further away and as yet undiscovered.

Evidence of hunting appears at all levels. The habitual prey appeared to be small ruminants, but the remains of a very young elephant and of large ruminants implies the hunting of larger animals. No evidence of livestock herding was found.

One of the levels yielded a radiocarbon date of 2680 ± 120 B.P., provisionally situating this culture in the first half of the first millennium B.C.

Palynological evidence suggests a sudanese savana landscape similar to that of the present day. Tools stuck in fissures of the bedrock indicate that the populations moved in while the rock was still totally or partially clear of sediments, but the period of occupation, on the other hand, corresponds to a phase of intense sedimentation. Although the sediments have not yet been analysed, it seems very probable that they are of windblown origin; this would correspond to a relatively arid climatic phase. The end of this sedimentation appears to coincide with the end of the neolithic occupation. Taking into account the carbon 14 date mentioned above, the neolithic occupation could correspond to the beginning of the present arid period.

The site of Fanfannyegne I does not appear to be unique. Indeed, during the survey in the National Park, numerous
surface sites with similar archaeological material were found, generally rock-shelters but also sites on the edge of springs and on the plain. At the present stage of research, the culture at the site of Fanfannyegene I seems to be well represented in the area of the "Parc National de la boucle du Baoulé"; however to the present day, in the region surrounding the park, only the rock-shelter of Kourounkorokale (Szumowski 1956) has so far been found to contain similar material.

To our knowledge, this cultural facies has no similarities with the neighbouring groups of "guinean neolithic" nor the "civilisation of dhar Tichitt-Oualata," and, except for several isolated elements, there is no basis for comparison with the different sub-Saharan neolithic remains, nor those of Tenere, nor those of Tilemsi.

On the other hand, despite differences in ceramic tradition, the stone artefacts suggest a relationship towards the west with the "dune neolithic" of the Cape Vert peninsula, dated between the beginning of the third and the middle of the first millennium B.C. (Lame, 1981). The ceramic material calls to mind the lacustrine neolithic as observed to the northeast on the banks of the Malian palaeolakes. This relatively ancient culture evolved between the end of the seventh and the beginning of the second millennium B.C. (Raimbault 1983, Commelin 1983).

Thus our studies indicate that the cultural facies of Fanfannyegene I is quite original in West Africa; consequently, we named it "neolithic facies of the Baoule." With all the usual reservations we can suggest that the probable origin of this cultural facies may be certain neolithic groups who a millennium before were still living on the banks of the Malian palaeolakes; a possible cause for this migration would have been the start of the present arid period.

References

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SUDAN

The Archaeological Mission of the University of Geneva to Kerma (Sudan): Final Report of the 1989–90 Season

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Excavations at Kerma by the Swiss Archaeological Mission to the Sudan took place between 10 December 1989 and 18 January 1990, with research and final measurements continuing until 28 January. Between fifty and eighty workmen were employed under the direction of the rais Gad Abdullah and Saleh Melish.