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## Eric de Dampierre and the Art of Fieldwork

Margaret Buckner

The aim of this chapter is not to circumscribe the work of Eric de Dampierre—that would be a task too daunting for this author—but to shine light on some of its various aspects, especially those that are related to his fieldwork in Africa. In order to limit the possibility of reducing his thought, I will use his words—albeit translated into English—to let him speak. My personal acquaintance with Dampierre began in 1982; I was a Peace Corps volunteer stationed in Bangassou, Central African Republic, the town where Dampierre carried out his fieldwork. Even before my three-year Peace Corps stint was up, I enrolled at the University of Paris-X (Nanterre) to pursue graduate studies in ethnology under his direction.

### Early Life

Eric de Dampierre was born on July 4, 1928 to an aristocratic family. His father was French, his mother Belgian, and he had an older sister. He must have been very gifted as a student, for he graduated from secondary school as a *bachelier* in philosophy when he was 16 years old, received his *license ès lettres* (the equivalent of an American Bachelor of Arts) at age 18, a second *license en droit* at age 19, and then graduated from the l'Institut d'études politiques of Paris ('Sciences Po Paris') as a 20-year-old. He was a prolific reader, not only in French, but also in English, German, Spanish, Italian, Latin, and Greek. He read literature, the classics, philosophy, history, sociology, political science, and anthropology, among others. In 1948-49 he completed his compulsory military service, first in Casablanca, then in Villacoublay (France).

At twenty years of age, he published his first article, 'Sociométrie : note étymologique' (Dampierre 1948). The paper explored the origin of the word 'sociometry', which a certain Dr. Moreno claimed to have coined in 1943 (Moreno 1943). Dampierre, however, traced it to an Austrian, F.X. de Neumann-Spallart, who used the term during a session of the International Institute of Statistics in Rome in 1887. Dampierre then cited August Chirac, who said he had invented the word first, and who developed his ideas in a published article (Chirac 1897). This first publication, at age twenty, showed Dampierre's extremely conscientious use of terms, and also his meticulous care in finding and critiquing original sources. He continued to trace words and concepts even—or rather, especially—after he went to Africa. For example, in 1984 he wrote an extremely detailed study of the word *nguinza*, now meaning 'money', concluding it was probably brought by Senegalese riflemen to Central Africa (*Note de recherche* n° 17)<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Dampierre wrote a total of 38 *notes de recherche* ("research notes") of varying lengths and on a variety of subjects. Six were later revised and published. They are located in the office of the Mission sociologique du Haut Oubangui, at the University of Paris-X (Nanterre).

By 1949, he had become involved with UNESCO, probably thanks to his acquaintance with Alfred Métraux, who at that time was director of the Department of Social Sciences at UNESCO. Dampierre participated in an interdisciplinary study of a French commune in the Paris suburbs and he wrote the report in 1949; it was published in 1956 under the title 'Malvire-sur-Desle: Une commune aux franges de la région parisienne' (Dampierre 1956). The study resulted from a conference held at the Royaumont Abby in September of 1948 on the comparative method in social sciences, and a follow-up meeting in May 1949. The researchers were trained in history, sociology, philosophy, psychology, and social psychology. The report is a classic example of community studies carried out at the time. It describes 'Malvire-sur-Desle' (a fictional name) in all its social, economic, and political complexity, and shows how the various factions in the community interacted—or not. In the methods section, Dampierre explains that the research team basically moved into the village, frequented cafes and bars, attended religious services, went to the movies and dances, and helped organize local festivals. Two months later, when the study officially began, residents were accustomed to seeing the researchers, and were inviting them to their homes for meals. The sociologists worked both with written documents and by carrying out ethnographic fieldwork. Dampierre, in this report and in others, does not treat sociology any differently than anthropology, and shows that good fieldwork can and should be carried out in both fields.<sup>2</sup>

In 1950, at age twenty-two, he left for the United States as an Exchange Fellow at the University of Chicago, where he was a member of the Committee on Social Thought. There he interacted with scholars such as Leo Strauss, Robert Redfield, and John Nef. He also rubbed shoulders with the anthropologists there, and was impressed by the four-field approach of American anthropology, as opposed to the divisions in France between ethnology, (physical) anthropology, and prehistory.

One of his earliest manuscripts, dated September 1951, perhaps written while he was in Chicago, is entitled, *Sur deux différents types d'hérétiques* (On two different kinds of heretics). In stark contrast to all of his other papers, this one has not a single footnote, citation, or reference. Thus, Dampierre writes:

Man, the first animal to want to discover his place in the universe and to search relentlessly for the meaning of his existence, uses in that search two types (*Ideal-Typus*) of thinking: dogmatic thinking and scientific thinking. ... In dogmatic thinking, truth is already there at the start, before it is discovered by man. It could be a revelation from God, ... a rational essence, ... or the meaning of history. In all these cases, man needs the key to the treasure; it is either given to him, or he must find it, or he must make it. In scientific thinking, there is no dogma. To continue with the metaphor, man must seek not the key to the treasure, but the treasure

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<sup>2</sup> Dampierre continued working on UNESCO projects even after he began carrying out fieldwork in Africa. In 1959, he was named program specialist at UNESCO and was responsible for the section on human rights and the fight against racial discrimination. In 1960, he traveled to Jerusalem and to the Neguev for UNESCO's organization for sociological research on irrigation in arid zones.

itself, though it never appears to him immediately. He constructs it himself, by abstracting it from reality and mentally organizing it. That is scientific theory. While dogma is the truth that is given to me, science is the truth that I verify, and thus that I create. ... Dogma is by its very essence unchangeable, perfect, and finite... The dogmatic heretic is burned at the stake. [Progression is possible, but it is progression in the revelation of the truth.] ... Science is, on the contrary, imperfect, cumulative, and infinite. The scientist does not seek to translate reality, he abstracts it to master it. ... He invents concepts, and the richer his imagination, the stronger his power of abstraction, the better his theory. ... Progress is inevitable. ... The scientific heretic inaugurates new theory. ... The heretic of yesterday is the doctor of tomorrow.

Thus, well before Robin Horton and others, Dampierre described in his own way how a traditional world view differs from modern scientific thinking.

Back in France in 1952, he resumed his studies and research under the direction of sociologist Raymond Aron. Aron 'defines the aim proper to sociology as the combination and reunion of the study of the part with the study of the whole' (Aron 1968:10). It is this aim that Dampierre followed. He was interested in how each society organizes itself, based on its own principles, and in how societies hold together, how all the different participants play their respective roles. His goal was to understand Society by discovering how societies work, how individuals form a society, what holds the group together, and what keeps it going.

In 1952, Dampierre became a researcher for the CNRS (Centre national de recherche scientifique) and was assigned to the Centre études sociologiques in Paris. In that same year, he launched and edited for Plon, a well-respected publishing house in Paris, the series '*Recherches en sciences humaines*'. Over the next twenty years or so, a total of thirty-three books were published in the series under Dampierre's direction, which included the first French translations of such scholars as Max Weber and Leo Strauss.

And so, by the time he made his first trip to Africa in 1954 at age twenty-six, he was extremely well read in several languages and in several disciplines, had earned several university degrees, had published articles and edited journals and books, had hobnobbed with leading social scientists in Chicago, had worked closely with sociologists and Africanists in Paris (for example, Michel Leiris, André Schaeffner, and Denise Paulme), and had carried out interdisciplinary projects in the field.

### **Fieldwork in Central Africa**

In the preface to *Un Ancien Royaume Bandia* (1967), Dampierre writes about his first mission to Bangassou, a town in eastern Central African Republic:

In 1954, a French government agency asked myself and a colleague to go find out why the Nzakara, who were thought to be dying out over the last half-century, were having so few children. It was a time when government administrators, who often had difficulty posing the right questions, still didn't know the answer. It was also a time when sociologists, unaware of their limits, wouldn't think of turning down an opportunity to work, no matter how uncertain the resources of their discipline.

Nzakaland had never known researchers before us. It is no longer very common to be the first researchers to arrive anywhere in Africa. We had to scout things out before we could build a research project. That first year, we never took our boots off. And we still had to answer the question. It is not too farfetched to suggest that there is no greater, more difficult or complex problem to address, whose meaning escapes us so mercilessly, than the problem that touches the meaning that humans attach to giving life. At the end of our first period of fieldwork (1954-1955), we were not able to satisfy those who had sent us, and, besides, their interests had already shifted to other matters.

Whether the difficulties were resolvable or not, we learned much by addressing them. Moreover, I developed respect for the way this old Zande society worked and affection for its political warriors, its intrepid poets, its witches, its noble diviners.

Dampierre was hooked from the start, and returned to Bangassou in 1957-1958. He surmised that the Nzakara were in no way practicing collective suicide by refusing to have children, as some had suggested. He asked that a physician go to Bangassou to explore medical reasons for the drop in natality. That physician was Dr. Anne Laurentin, who in 1960-61 discovered that venereal diseases were probably the cause of infertility. She also took up ethnographic studies of her own.

That first trip to Bangassou, commissioned by ORSTOM (*Office de la Recherche Scientifique et Technique d'Outre-Mer*) was the maiden mission of the MSHO (*Mission sociologique du Haut-Oubangui - Sociological Mission of the Upper Ubangui*). The EPHE (*Ecole pratique des hautes études*), and then the CNRS financed successive periods of fieldwork for the MSHO, 1957-1958, 1964-1965, annually from 1966 to 1979, and again annually from 1981 to 1987. Dampierre also went to Bangassou in 1960-1961. The MSHO had an office in the basement of the *Musée de l'Homme* in Paris, next to the office of Michel Leiris and other Africanists. In the early 1980s, the MSHO joined the *Laboratoire d'ethnologie et de sociologie comparative* on the campus of the University of Paris X-Nanterre. The MSHO had a post office box (number 98) at the Bangassou post office at least until the mid 1990s.

Dampierre established a research station on the outskirts of the town of Bangassou, at the home of a former plantation owner, Godeste, which also became the name of the station. The house, which sat in a clearing surrounded by forest, was made of stone, with a thatched roof; it had two large rooms and a small annex for washing. About twenty yards from the house, there was a smaller, round house that had a spare bedroom and a large shady porch that served as dining area. The station became Dampierre's second home, and he returned regularly for periods of several months until the late 1980s. He more or less adopted an extended Nzakara family to help run the research station, including a housekeeper, a cook, a driver, a mechanic, a groundskeeper, and a few others. He would stop in at their village on the way to Bangassou, load them all into his Land-Rover, and drive them to Godeste, where they would make themselves at home for the season. An aristocrat, he felt at home among the class-conscious Nzakara, a people who shared his interest in making living an art.

With Godeste as his home base, Dampierre traveled the length and breadth of Nzakaraland, stopping in at villages and getting to know especially the elders who lived there. He also made excursions into Zandeland, going at least as far east as Mboki. On a few occasions, he would bring elders and musicians to the Godeste research station. One such festival of music and poetry took place on November 19, 1971; he supplied transport, room, board, and drink to several renowned Nzakara harpist-poets so they could all relive the music, language and courtly ambience of yore.

Dampierre involved as many other researchers as possible from other disciplines and backgrounds, inviting them to spend time at Godeste. The list of guests and colleagues includes botanists, a geologist, a musicologist, a linguist, as well as other anthropologists. But fieldwork was not enough. He had to join in people's lives and build relationships; people were not just objects of study, but collaborators, friends, and family, and he felt quite comfortable among them. In an earlier publication (Dampierre 1956), he had listed getting to know the locals and participating in village life as a technique to gain better knowledge about them. In Africa, it no longer seemed that establishing a warm relationship with one's fellows was a means to an end; it became, instead, an end in itself. He was already ready to help, both monetarily and logistically; in emergencies his Land-Rover often served as the local ambulance. He taught sporadically at the *Lycée de Bangassou*; he encouraged students there to pursue studies in sociology and ethnology, and sought financial backing for them to continue their studies in Bangui and eventually Paris.

### **Fieldwork philosophy**

For Dampierre, ethnology and sociology are really one and the same. He studied French villages and Nzakara villages using the same techniques and methods: a combination of historical documents, interviews and conversations with local people about their past and present, and detailed observation of behavior, practices, and institutions. All three (historical documents, oral history, ethnography) reinforce each other.

He had always been interested in social dynamics, in how and why societies change over time. To understand social and cultural processes and dynamics, a historical perspective is essential. Many, if not most, of his descriptions of Nzakara society of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century are based on historical documents. His major work, *Un Ancien Royaume Bandia*, has a 70-page review of historical sources (*Étude critique des sources*). But he combined historical accounts with an understanding gained from living among the Nzakara, learning their language, listening to their poets, learning their proverbs, and observing their customs and traditions. In his dissertation defense (1968), Dampierre explains:

The method I used in this work is perhaps not completely recommended. Our British colleagues, who rightly insist that the ethnologist should observe behavior rather than listen to what people say or read old texts, warn us not to read the past into the present or read the present into the past. But that is exactly what I have done, while taking special precautions. The first, and the most important, is to do fieldwork *before* reading historical documents. One is often surprised to find, after five or ten years, new meaning in documents that at first

seemed absurd, wrong, or crazy. One must, of course, make the necessary transpositions, and, from the very beginning, understand how such or such behavior would have appeared to the innocent explorer or administrator. To that first effort I have added a second: to treat the European context and the African context in counterpoint. The contrasting interpretations of the treaty between [King] Bangassou and Vangele [Belgian explorer] provide a good example. Furthermore, one must spend a long time in a place in order to grasp the African reality behind the administrative accounts (1968:1-2).

He wove together written history and oral history to piece together the past, to sketch out past events that led to current social organization. He had faith that oral history, properly gathered and interpreted, could be more reliable than second-, third-, and fourth-hand accounts recorded by Europeans travelers and administrators. In a very slim book, *Des ennemis, des arabes, des histoires...* (1983), Dampierre refutes the generally accepted historical account that the Arab slave-trader Rabih invaded the Nzakara kingdom twice, vanquished the royal army, and pillaged the territory. He demonstrates that artfully gathering oral traditions yields better results than consulting the frequently erroneous accounts of European explorers. His concluding paragraph summarizes the role of the ethnographer or oral historian:

I have attempted here, after critically reviewing the sources, as all good historians should, to reconstruct the collective experience of partial testimonies, scattered in space and time, and to understand that experience through its reflection in the mirror of the outsider. In a society without writing, asking piecemeal questions in privacy gets only useless information or answers that most please the interrogator. That is why continuously questioning the elders can only be useful over a lifetime and done in public. One must learn to get old. Contrary to what one often feels obliged to write, bringing that experience to the surface has nothing to do with tradition. That very action, for the society that wants or accepts it, can actually preserve tradition. We need to know how to use tradition to uncover what refutes it. Such is the work of the mandrels, those modest intermediaries (1983:41).

Like Nzakara poets, Dampierre uses a metaphor to describe his role in the process: that of a mandrel. A mandrel is a cylindrical, rotating shaft that serves as an axis for a larger rotating part. He saw himself as a tool allowing the various partial memories of Nzakara experience to take shape in a coherent history, thus enabling the Nzakara to solidify their tradition.



Dampierre emphasized his point about the necessity of long-term fieldwork by offering a counterexample, in the form of an epigraph, on the same page: ‘We were so successful that at the end of two hours, the Pygmy was sketched, measured, feasted, showered with gifts, and submitted to a detailed interrogation’ (Schweinfurth 1875: 113).

Using documents and texts from individual perspectives is something he had long thought about. In an early publication, ‘Le sociologue et l’analyse des documents personnels’ (1957), Dampierre proposed that using ‘personal documents [autobiographies, personal letters, diaries, drawings, unguided interviews faithfully transcribed], for the same time and effort, provide much richer material than most other

techniques used in social science' (1957:444). One must remember, he continued, that personal documents may not be sincere, may not be pertinent, and may be affected by direct stimulation or solicitation. They also represent only one point of view. But they can be useful to ethnologists who are trying to reconstruct an indigenous culture from the inside. In the same paper, Dampierre offers instructions for how to use such documents fruitfully, while avoiding the traps. In the field, he collected many kinds of personal documentation, both written (for example, by school-age Zande refugees living at the refugee camp in Mboki) and tape-recorded (especially life histories and historical narratives).

Dampierre learned the language—one of the first French ethnographers to do so—and he learned it well. People told me that he spoke Nzakara like an elder, which was a compliment indeed. Dampierre was versed in phonology and in linguistic theory, and he set about compiling a Nzakara dictionary. His understanding of the language allowed him not only to question and converse with the Nzakara, but also to pay attention to people's unsolicited, spontaneous comments, to how they formulate their ideas, and to their choice of phrases and figurative expressions. Many of his findings are based on what he heard people say, as well as what they never said. For example, when discussing musical instruments, he states 'To have been made by a child is a way for an object not to exist' (1995: 68); in other words, saying that something was made by a child is saying that it is irrelevant.

Besides being a means to an end, Dampierre also considered the language as an end in itself. The language serves as a window into the culture. He used features of the language to support his ideas about the Nzakara mode of thought and aesthetic. In a paper written in 1983 (*Note de recherche* n°12), he exposed the Nzakara '*catégories de l'entendement*' in a structured table similar to studies of Greek categories. We would spend hours discussing possible English, French, and other translations for Zande words, always flitting through the pages of the Lalande *Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie*.

Dampierre was drawn to the poetry and music of the Nzakara and Zande harpists. He traveled the length and breadth of Nzakara country to record the best harpists, lugging the Nagra, and later the Uher, tape recorders, along with microphones, batteries, cables, extra reels, etc. He often encountered obstacles: technical malfunction, poor weather, illness, absences, funerals, etc. He learned Nzakara poetry inside out, the 'double speech', the allusions, the idiomatic expressions, the figures of speech. Many of the examples for usage in the dictionary he was elaborating come from the poems. Throughout his books and articles, he refers to snatches of song that, through allusions and proverbs, reveal the inner workings of Nzakara society. Dampierre himself used language poetically. It is evident in his translations of 'oral literature' and texts, as well as in his writings. He published two volumes of Nzakara poetry (1963, 1987)<sup>3</sup>, which he rendered into French poetry.

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<sup>3</sup> *Poetes nzakara* (2 volumes, 1963, ms.; *Poetes nzakara II* is a finished manuscript but was not published); also *Satires de Lamadani* (1987, text and cassette).



As anyone who worked with him knew, Dampierre was extremely observant, down to the finest details. Nothing escaped his interest. His observations were eclectic, all-inclusive, involving every facet of discourse and behavior, from greetings to building houses to playing the harp to fighting battles. No person, practice, technique, word was irrelevant. He talked with all members of society, commoners and nobles, young and old, men and women; studying them in isolation is pointless, for their interaction is what holds a society together. Though he had tremendous admiration for Evans-Pritchard, Dampierre bemoaned the fact that Evans-Pritchard had not been able to include women in his fieldwork.<sup>4</sup>

He sought guiding principles that held though different practices and institutions. For example, in *Note de recherche* n° 1 (1974), he argues that playing *kisoro*, a Zande and Nzakara board game, actually reenacts the strategy and tactics of Zande armies, as described by Evans-Pritchard (1971). The game board consists of four rows of eight holes; each adversary has two rows and thirty-two 'men'. Among the principles: territory is never conquered by force. Victory belongs to the side that weakens the enemy to point of having no more warriors. Both sides play at the same time; there is no handicap at the start of a battle, and each side has an equal chance to win. The manoeuvres are parallel, but each adversary moves his men independently of the other's movements. Captured men are immediately incorporated into the captor's army. Strategy involves taking advantage of the imbalances of the opposing army in order to capture the most men, while at the same time not exposing one's own army to attacks of the adversary. The best tactic is to move the most men quickly, which tends to reestablish the starting positions by redistributing one's army, and to take the most men to increase the size of one's army. Thus, studying the way the Nzakara played *kisoro* was also studying Nzakara and Zande military tactics.

Similarly, he saw the analogy between the keys on a *sanza* ('thumb piano', an idiophone) and kinship (1982). As he watched a *sanza*-player work, he asked him questions and listened thoughtfully to his responses. Through these technical conversations there gradually emerged a representation of the sounds and the scale. The series of keys is called the lineage. The bridge (*chevalet*) is called 'the mother-in-law carrying children'. The six keys on one side are all slightly lower than the six keys on the other side: the elder and younger lineages. The keys are named: the fathers (one on each side), the mothers (three on each side, including the favorite, the head wife, the 'big wife' who works for the head wife, and two lesser wives; then four children, in birth order. Gilbert Rouget (1982) then studied the intervals between the key's notes, and

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<sup>4</sup> Dampierre had only compliments for Evans-Pritchard's ethnography of "the Zande society, which has been so magnificently studied since 1927 by E.E. Evans-Pritchard, whom I could not sufficiently praise for his scrupulous exactitude" (1967: 247). He read everything Evans-Pritchard had written about the Zande. He sent Evans-Pritchard a draft of at least some chapters of his dissertation, and he visited with him on at least a few occasions.

found that key number 7, the 'big wife', the one who always does whatever she likes, also sticks out musically, is asymmetrical.

### **Political organization of the Bandia kingdoms**

Not surprisingly, since he was a graduate of the Institute of political science, Dampierre's early research focused on the political organization of the Bandia kingdoms in the upper Ubangui and Uele basins. His main question was, what is the social foundation of political authority? He was well acquainted with Max Weber's three types of legitimate rule: legal or rational authority, charismatic authority, and traditional authority (Weber 1922). He seemed to use the Bandia kingdom in Nzakaraland as a living example of Max Weber's traditional authority. He was especially interested in how the Bandia clan, foreigners in Nzakaraland, established their political power; how they made the Nzakara need them. He addressed the question in his dissertation defense:

Every once in a while, we see appear in history what historians call a military autocracy. Not long ago, P. de Vaux (1967) described the secret of the Horites in Genesis: 'Once they infiltrated Palestine they seized power in the principal Palestinian cities and, without imposing their language or their customs, they quickly assimilated into the native populations.' Those are people who resemble our Bandia. But how did it happen? By what mechanisms, by what needs, by what liberties? Can one truly explain power without analyzing dependence? For power is in part violence, and the exercise of violence, like the exercise of war, is not an easy object of sociological study. Looking through the other end of the telescope is, I feel, more fruitful. How are the bonds of dependence in a given society woven, organized, and hierarchized? That indeed makes a good object of study (1968:3).

E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1971) had studied the political organization of the Vungara dynasties in central and eastern Zandeland. Dampierre analyzed the political organization of the three Bandia dynasties in western Zandeland and Nzakaraland, and, in particular, the kingdom of Bangassou. Out of ten or so Zande kingdoms, Evans-Pritchard studied the one farthest east (that of King Gbudwe, Vungara) and Dampierre studied the one farthest west (that of King Bangassou, Bandia); they thus covered the two ends of the spectrum.

Ethnically, the Zande and Nzakara are very closely related; the two groups are so close that early explorers called the Nzakara 'the Western Zande'. They have virtually identical kinship systems, social and political organization, and belief systems (witchcraft, oracles, magic, and diviners). The Nzakara and Zande languages are still close enough to be mutually comprehensible for some native speakers; it is estimated that they diverged no more than 1000 years ago. Between the Nzakara-speaking kingdom of Bangassou and the western-most Zande-speaking kingdom, Rafai, the language boundary is fuzzy, there are many bilinguals, and there is much intermarriage.

Though the Zande and Nzakara shared a similar social and political organization, there was a crucial structural difference between the two ruling dynasties. The Vungara were a native Zande clan who grew to dominate their own people and then expanded

eastward to incorporate and Zande-ize foreign peoples. Conversely, the Bandia were foreign Ngbandi-speakers who came north and adopted the Nzakara and Zande language and customs even as they established political domination. In a nutshell, the Vungara moved out, the Bandia moved in. This inversion led to further distinctions between the two dynasties. For example, the Vungara kingdoms were very unstable; a twenty-year period saw a new set of kingdoms. The Bandia, on the other hand, had three very stable kingdoms. The Vungara princes, especially in the newer, easternmost regions, were each others' worst enemies, while among the Bandia, there was much less royal fratricide. While the Zande kingdoms (especially the eastern ones) were made up of diverse peoples, the Nzakara and western Zande were more homogenous.

In *Azande History and Political Institutions* (1971), Evans-Pritchard argued for the classic progression from hunters & gatherers to agriculture, which produced a surplus; the surplus was used by the Vungara for political advantage. The Vungara kings and princes, by using permanent battalions of young warriors and the temporary labor of adult men to work their fields, and also by receiving tribute from the surrounding area, were able to control a very large amount of food, which they then redistributed in a way that strengthened their authority. The Vungara courts also assured stability, military protection and justice for peoples which until then had been small-scale, autonomous groups. Food was given generously to feed the courtiers, the battalions and their leaders, and the people who came to the court for redress of wrongs or with requests of the king. Evans-Pritchard states that the kings gave bride wealth (in the form of marriage spears) to anyone who asked. He also gave wives to loyal governors, military leaders, and others who had shown him great service or loyalty. The number of subjects of a given king was directly related to the king's hospitality, military strength, and justice. Wars were fought to gain subjects, who would contribute to the king's stores and labor and military pool.

Dampierre, however, in *Un ancien royaume bandia* (1967) and another publication (1971), describes a very different scenario for the Bandia conquest. In ancient Nzakara (and Zande) society, lineages were equal and wives were exchanged between lineages. No lineage was better than another. The circulation of women was strictly limited to marriage transactions. Families exchanged sisters and became allies. Each lineage was simultaneously wife giver and wife taker. In this system, a *régime de la parentèle*, allies were assured (1971: 267). When the Bandia arrived, they adopted the Nzakara and Zande system of kinship and alliance, but they co-opted the system and used it to their advantage. The Bandia were foreigners, and needed to get into the good graces of the local Nzakara and Zande population. They did this by supplying wives not to their relatives but to their clients (subjects). Women went from being exchanged by lineage elders to being distributed by Bandia rulers. No longer was equality at the heart of the exchange. By controlling the circulation of women, the Bandia developed clienteles at the expense of the traditional, egalitarian lineage system. 'A surplus of women and their distribution by the dominant clan are the keys of the new system, which, though it creates allies, is much better equipped to create subjects' (1967: 294-5). Gradually, allegiance replaced alliance. Residence was no longer based on kin groupings, but on client groupings.

To continue to be givers of wives, the Bandia needed a surplus of women. Annual wars were fought not to expand territory and to incorporate more subjects into the kingdoms, but to bring back women and girls to give away as wives to subjects as they pleased. Dampierre was explicit about the reasons for the wars: 'The maximum acquisition of women became the means of government and renewed the symbolic pomp of power' (1967:273). When the Europeans arrived, the well dried up. There were no more wars to capture women to distribute. And because the Europeans upheld the right of women to be married by compensation only, the Bandia were no longer able to distribute women as needed to maintain their authority; they lost their clients, and without clients, were no longer patrons.

A later paper, 'Les idées-forces de la politique des Bandia à travers les propos de leurs souverains (1870-1917)' (1998), further contributes to our understanding of the Bandia kingdoms. In it, Dampierre examines the kings' own words to see how they themselves regarded their power. For example, King Djabir said to Commandant Francqui, 'I cannot yet tell you which of my two sons will be designated by my people to succeed me; certainly the best will be chosen, and whatever my people decides will be for the best.' In his commentary, Dampierre explains: the king is chosen by a royal council, approved by the royal family, and acclaimed by an assembly of adult men. Second, King Bangassou said he is 'the master of people, not the guardian of borders.' Dampierre comments that the notion of borders is totally foreign to African political life. In a third example, King Bangassou said to Bonnel de Mézières: 'You see the Kengu [Mbomu] River? It is big because the other streams flow into it. It is the same with my chiefs: if they didn't need my gifts, they would no longer come to me and I would be nothing.' Dampierre explains: The power of a Bandia king only becomes authority when he renounces violence and sets about meeting the needs of those who have sworn him allegiance. In other words, the king commands only because he redistributes food, goods and especially wives.

Dampierre was as interested in the demise of the Bandia kingdoms as in their origin, and also traced the breaking up of traditional Nzakara society. He once observed that the Zande, because they adopted new practices so readily, 'bent' as they adapted to the modern world, whereas the Nzakara, intent on defending their traditions, resisted and 'broke'. He was saddened by the rupture he observed taking place between Nzakara elders and Nzakara youth, especially those who went to school.

In his article 'Coton noir, café blanc' (1960), he describes in detail how the introduction of the plantation system was apparently the most immediate source of conflicts and of the breaking up of traditional society. The *paysannat* system (used for coffee cultivation) brought about important changes in cultural practices and modifications in the network of daily social relations. Traditional grouped fields were replaced by the strip plantation system. The new system accentuated the 'injustices' of the gendered division of labor: men had nothing left to do, since, traditionally, women did the work in the fields. The new plantation system also upset the time frame for rotating fields: traditionally plots were planted for three or four years, then left fallow until the 17<sup>th</sup> year. Now, new plots would be cleared and planted each year, and would

not be used again for 17 years. Finally, Dampierre commented on a more subtle aspect of the change: a *paysannat* system implies the existences of *paysans*, or peasants, in other words, farmers who grow a surplus that will be sold in a market. But there can be no peasants until there are citizens (residents of a city); there can be no countryside without a city, for those two terms are indissolubly tied together by a double flow of exchanges. The countryside cannot do without the city and the city cannot do without the countryside. Populations in the Mbomu did not yet have needs. The Nzakara did not produce more than they needed for their own subsistence, their traditional obligations, or their taxes. Moreover, they often left some of their crops unharvested. The products of the city reached them only in the form of cloth and aluminum basins. Why would they want to double their income?

In this paper and others (for example, the chapter in *Un ancien royaume bandia* entitled ‘A model pillage economy’), Dampierre analyzes in detail the motives and practices of the colonial powers and the trading companies, in particular, the *Société des Sultanats*, which sucked the land dry. He shows once again that a process or situation cannot be understood without considering the historical context and *all* the actors involved. In fact, in his dissertation defense (1968), he even considers the reasons for colonization in the first place, and, especially, the specificity of the French colonial context, by citing philosophers such as Renan and colonial administrators such as Jules Ferry. The French colonist, according to Ferry (1982), ‘believes he is carrying out an act of civic virtue by leaving the land of his birth, and sees his motherland less as a benefactor than as having an obligation’ (cited in Dampierre 1968:5). On the other hand, as Aron (1951:70) says, the characteristic that all imperialist policies have in common is that they find their origin in the ‘political ambitions that chancelleries camouflaged (or rationalized) by invoking realistic motives’ (cited in Dampierre 1968:6).

### **Nzakara poetry**

As mentioned earlier, Dampierre was drawn to the musical poetry of the Nzakara and Zande. That society’s music and oral art became a second research theme. At first, he collected texts of the poems—sung by harpists as they played—to learn the language better and work on a Nzakara glossary, but the poetry appealed to him in its own right. Each song is a unique event, improvised on the spot, without recognizable beginnings or endings. The poets were often minstrels at royal courts; their social and political commentary was keen. The poems are full of word-play, humor, irony, satire, and stinging criticism veiled in metaphor. They also express the complaints and the desires of everyday life. Finally, they are a chronicle of court life. He published *Poètes Nzakara* (1963) after spending many long months perfecting the translations of the harpists’ songs with the help of his Nzakara collaborator Robert Bangbanzi; it was the first collection of texts to be published in the Nzakara language. The translations were all the more difficult in that French and Nzakara are very different languages, and in that the texts were poems.

Besides the words of the songs, Dampierre bent his interest to the music itself, and to the instrument. He spent several years tracking down Zande harps that had found

their way into European museums. He corresponded with lute-makers, with art historians, and with curators around the world. His two last books, *Harpes zande* (1992) and *Une esthétique perdue* (1995), are dedicated to the harps, harp music, and harpists, and have received rave reviews from international specialists.

### **‘Thinking in the singular’**

A truly overarching theme that seemed to anchor Dampierre’s fieldwork is the Nzakara-Zande way of seeing and thinking the world in terms of the singular, in terms of more or less. In his 1984 book, *Penser au singulier*, he proposed that the Nzakara ‘*pensent au singulier*’—think in the singular. ‘Everything on earth has a singular existence. Nothing is identical, or equal, to anything else. Each thing or being is viewed in its difference’ (1984:11). The Nzakara language cannot express identity. In other words, A and B cannot be identical, or equal, though they can be similar. Thus, two shadows made by the same person are aberrant and signs of disorder. No two people are identical, or equal. Among other things, this explains why the birth of twins—two ‘identical’ beings—is such a disruptive event. It also explains why counting human beings is rude. It implies they are interchangeable, that each has the same value and characteristics as another. King Bangassou knew how many battalions he had, but not how many men fought in them. Lengths, distances, volumes, and periods of time are not measured using abstract measurements. Distances are described in terms of days of walking, or number of streams crossed. Time is described by using points (sunrise, noon, sunset, etc.) Quantities and surfaces are never divided into equal parts, and there must always be a remainder. Symmetry is avoided. Besides being different, or as a result of being different, each thing or being is ranked or ordered. Notes on a musical scale, lineages, brothers, wives... each occupies a place on an ordered scale, and is thought of in that order. He observed this way of seeing the world in everyday life: women selling palm oil at the market (the ‘remainder’ was their profit), dividing a piece of food, building a roof, and teaching math at the *lycée*.

Dampierre observes that ‘thinking in the singular’ permeates the Zande-Nzakara aesthetic, in rhythms, voice, musical scales, sculpture, and performance. Harpists, singers, and sculptors look for asymmetry, for individual, ‘singular’ performances, for ‘remainders’, rather than for symmetry and regular rhythms, intervals, and features. And, perhaps especially, no two harps or performances should ever be identical.

In *Une esthétique perdue* (1995), one of his latest publications, he calls the Nzakara (and Zande) a ‘society of irreducible individualists.’ He emphasizes that this same way of thinking in the singular influences all Nzakara (and Zande) thought, discourse, and practices. He asks: ‘isn’t an aesthetic, whatever its source, necessarily totalizing (*totalisant*)?’ He seeks to describe ‘an aesthetic of the singular, that I think is at work in several areas: rhetoric, sculpture, music’ (1995:14).

From morning to night, all Nzakara thinking heads think in terms of more and less, of excess and deficiency (... and also elder and younger, father and son, head wife and favorite), just as pre-Socratics who would have understood why Plato replaced the One and the Infinite of Pythagorus with the One and the Dyad of the Greater and the Lesser (1995:16).

In ‘Accord entre deux harpes, accord entre deux voix en Afrique équatoriale’ (*Note de recherche* n° 29, 1994), he relates this principle to the voice, especially in *chantefables*, the cycle of Trickster tales that alternate sung parts and spoken narrative:

Not only does the singing voice oppose the speaking voice, but it is sung at an octave of the normal speaking voice. [...] The ‘head voice’, sometimes a falsetto (throat voice, *voix de faucet*), is opposed to the chest voice. [...] In *chantefables*, this head voice designates the intervention of a supernatural operator, either to transpose the action from the everyday world to a special world of marvels, or to bring the action back to the everyday world. [...] Head voice and falsetto could be considered variants of ‘an octave voice’, though it is more complex. An ‘octave voice’ alone would be considered ‘the same’ as a normal voice.

I would propose the following hypothesis: with regard to Nzakara court music, the conscious discussion among musicians keeps coming back to antinomy between the ‘impossible’ unison and the ‘obvious’ antiphony (octave consonance), between the impossible same and the Other that passes for the same. To escape this unsolvable antinomy, the best solution is the Dyad of more and less, of Excess and Deficiency.

A footnote ties the Nzakara to the Greeks (something he did often); he cites Aristotle’s comment that ‘mixed is always more agreeable than homogenous’.

He also tied ‘thinking in the singular’ to rhythms: there is always something left over; rhythms are staggered, they always have a gap, a lag, an irregular interval.

For the Nzakara and Zande, the distinction is there, in the fine analysis of the repetitions. But distinction is not difference, distinction is not a relationship, because all true relations imply the analysis of the particular and would reveal some level of participation of the being. We remain faced with the Dyad to create formulas, fleeing all strictly equivalent relations. That notion, described in the mind of a [Greek] philosopher, is found again, in the societies of the Upper-Ubangui, shaping the daily, lived experience, starting with that of musicians (1995: 18).

Then, in one of his latest papers, ‘Le reste épimore’ (*Note de recherche* n° 33, revised version, 1996), he makes perhaps his clearest description of ‘thinking in the singular’:

I continue searching for the basis of the practices described in *Penser au singulier* and *Une esthétique perdue* concerning the rejection of equal sizes, the rejection of symmetrical areas, and the rejection of commensurate durations. The rejection correlates with the emphasis put on ‘remainders’, which are not truly remainders since no exhaustive procedure to reach a limit was sought. These ‘remainders’, which make calculations troublesome, are conceived of by Zande and Nzakara as a privileged property of nature that only human will can, in certain cases and under certain conditions, get rid of.

These practices in the Upper-Ubangui, which lead to the explicit formulation of ‘thinking in the singular’, render vain—illusory, even scandalous by nature—all relations of identity, whatever they may be.

Finally, in ‘Les idées-forces de la politique des Bandia à travers les propos de leurs souverains (1870-1917)’ (1998), Dampierre shows how the singular had been

enacted politically, and how it came to an end by a political act. Here he summarizes the important change that was brought about consciously by Bandia rulers:

In the 1880s, Bangassou declared by an oath before the shrine Bendo—and not at the ancestors' shrine—that from now on he would reign over an immense people, made up of foreigners from all over. It was a historic moment: the oath before Bendo is the equivalent of a reform of Clithène. The sovereign solemnly renounces the ancestral foundations of his authority. He renounces treating people in the singular organized by descent and alliance, kin ties, and clientele. Lineage affiliation will no longer be the organizing principle of his people. [...]

Bendo is the refusal of natural determinism, the subversion of superdetermined order. It is the inauguration of civil society. The lineages rebelled. The king's own sister turned the Bendo shrines upside-down, 'to save the throne of her father, Mbali'.

This inversion of accepted values could only have been carried out by the king. The decision created identical subjects, and, in particular, treated Arabs, Whites, and Blacks on the same level. Bendo, the friend of women, the protector of harvests, had presided over the identification of everyone with everyone. A universalist rule had appeared. The singular, which is ignorant of the distinction between the particular and the universal, had lived politically (1998:13-14).

It is this idea of 'thinking in the singular' that guided Dampierre's research and writing since the early 1980s. The idea was born of and borne out by his observations and experiences during long, repeated periods of fieldwork among the Nzakara.

### **Dampierre's legacy**

First and foremost, thanks to his skilled, intense, and long-term fieldwork, Dampierre helped preserve the history, language, knowledge and music of the Nzakara for the Nzakara themselves. He showed that he was conscious of that contribution in the introduction to *Un ancien royaume bandia* (1967):

Akabati, Zangandu, Nukusa, Kaali, Gbesende, Vugba, Sayo, and others who offered me hospitality have now died without knowing that by talking with me they also wrote their people's history. Their sons, all too conscious of their past because they want to be others, reclaim that history, fearful that they'll never know it. If this book, by some horrible trick of history, could transmit to the sons the knowledge of their fathers, it would take its place among the uncertain fruits of those few very rare years in human history: those few years in which our common civilization, impoverished because merged into one, but infinitely rich in a history it recreates endlessly while at the same time projecting its future, meets and immediately recounts insolently the complex splendor of societies who live in the present and are content with their origins, but who discover in the hearts of their children, for the first and the last time, the face of the outsider (1967:12).

Dampierre laid the groundwork for us to follow. In the preface of *Une esthétique perdue* he challenges us to continue to search for what makes the Nzakara and Zande society so distinct:

'We hope that these [...] projects will be completed. As of now, it clearly seems that the ideas elaborated elsewhere to explain the sculpture and music of central Africa do not allow us to



understand the particularity/uniqueness of Zande society. That should not be surprising: different analyses for different societies. It must be said that after a century of work, the deepest workings of this society of irreducible individualists still escape us. [...] We must one day undertake head-on a study of Nzakara and Zande rhetoric. It goes without saying that what is said must be qualified by the discourse situation and context. But we must also ask ourselves a less obvious question: can an entire society daily wish for the same and its contrary in order to escape the vicissitudes of human life? [...] This edited collection, preceded and followed by other works, is only a milestone on a very difficult road, on a wild goose chase whose first entrant was E. E. Evans-Pritchard. [...] We know that others will have to join us, others that the generous and rigorous analysis of the ways of African esthetics also sometimes keep from sleeping (1995:10-11).

The office of the *Mission sociologique du Haut-Oubangui*, currently attached to the *Laboratoire d'ethnologie et de sociologie comparative* at the University of Paris-X (Nanterre), is one of Dampierre's most impressive legacies and is a monument to his fieldwork. He collected published and unpublished works dealing with the general area of the Upper Ubangui as well as neighboring peoples. He deposited there for the use of interested researchers miles of recorded tapes (both music and narrative, in Nzakara, Zande, and, more rarely, Sango), hundreds of photographs (both historical and those he himself took in the field), the complete genealogical records of the various lineages of the Bandia clan going back some fourteen generations, a map collection, a plant collection, a French-Nzakara dictionary, and dozens of indexed field notebooks. Because he used historical sources so painstakingly yet successfully, he was very aware of the importance of leaving proper records of his own observations and experiences; his field notebooks—all fifty or so of them—are numbered, paginated, indexed and cross-referenced, and furnish evidence and examples for his published works and unpublished papers.

Finally, Eric de Dampierre will be remembered for and by his students and colleagues at both the Department of Ethnology and the *Laboratoire d'ethnologie et de sociologie* at the University of Paris X. As director of those institutions, and then as an 'elder', he instilled in all of us the importance of thorough, careful fieldwork. Long, repeated, periods in the field were crucial, as was learning the language. He was skeptical of ethnographers who went only once to the field, did not stay long, and did not learn the language well. His principles were passed on through his graduate seminars and supervision of dissertations. The emphasis on fieldwork that he instilled in ethnology at Nanterre lives on.

As the Nzakara would insist, he was a man *hors par*—without equal.

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