



# Territorial Construction Dynamics: An Anthropological Historical Overview of the Tagoi Kingdom in Sudan's Nuba Mountains

ديناميات بناء الإقليم: رؤية أنثروبولوجية تاريخية لمملكة تَقُوي بجبال  
النوبة السودانية

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## ملخص

تتناول هذه المقالة عملية بناء مملكة تَقُوي والتحديات المتعلقة بالأراضي والحدود التي واجهتها، من خلال دراسة مراحل بنائها، وترسيم حدودها، ونظام حكمها. بالاعتماد على العمل الميداني طويل الأمد بين أفراد قبيلة تَقُوي، تستند المقالة إلى نهج سردي نوعي مدعوم بمقابلات فردية وجماعية معمّقة. وتستكمل المنشورات العلمية، الجمع الميداني للبيانات بإضافة أبعاد سياقية ورؤى أشمل لفهم سرديات أفراد قبيلة تَقُوي. تكشف النتائج الرئيسية أن إقليمية تَقُوي تكوّنت بوصفها مفهومًا اجتماعيًا سياسيًا، تولّد من تأثير عوامل كترسيم الحدود المحسوب، والآليات السياسية الإقليمية، والهجرة، وإجراءات التحكم الاستعماري، والتزاوج بين المجموعات، والتقسيمات الفرعية، والتلاقح الثقافي. وفيما بعد، أفضت التغيّرات الديموغرافية، والمواجهات العنيفة، وسياسات الدولة، واستملاك الأراضي بالقوة إلى تراجع سلطة تَقُوي وأعرافهم المتعلقة بإدارة الأراضي. وتُظهر المقالة طبيعة حدود أراضي تَقُوي المتقيّدة بالأوضاع التاريخية، مركّزة على العمليات المُعادة من البناء والخلافات والهدم. الكلمات الدالة: تَقُوي؛ سلطة؛ إقليم؛ نزاع؛ حدود.

## Abstract

This article probes the construction of Tagoi Kingdom, and the challenges it faced regarding territory and borders. It aims to explain how this kingdom was constructed, demarcated, and governed, and to identify the phases of this territorial formation. Drawing on long-term fieldwork among the Tagoi, the article makes use of a qualitative narrative approach, generating findings from in-depth individual and group interviews. Scholarly literature supplements this fieldwork, adding context and broader perspectives to enhance understanding of the Tagoi's narratives. The main findings show that Tagoi territoriality materialised as a

sociopolitical construct, initially structured by calculated border demarcation, regional political dynamics, migration, colonial control measures, intergroup marriage, intra-border compartmentalisation, and cultural interaction. Subsequent population changes, violent conflicts, state policies, and land grabbing gradually eroded Tagoi authority and customary land governance. The article emphasises the historically contingent nature of Tagoi territory, spotlighting its repetitive process of construction, contestation, and dismantlement.

**Keywords:** Tagoi; authority; territory; conflict; border.

## Introduction

As per Tegali oral traditions, by the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, the kings of Tegali ruled over most of the eastern Nuba Mountains. On friendly relations with the powerful kings of Sinnar in the Blue Nile region, they seated Funj immigrants as vassal kings over the areas of the mountains of Tagoi, Rashad, and Gadir. They did not oversee these three small kingdoms directly but contented themselves with controlling the appointments of their kings, exacting annual tributes through their agency, and suppressing them when they became unruly. In later years, both the Rashad and the Tagoi were allowed to become more independent kingdoms (Elles, 1935, pp. 22-28).

A single version of oral history, passed down through generations and across diverse segments of Tagoi society, constitutes the sole source of historical knowledge. No documents are available to shed light on the history of the Tagoi people. This oral history tells that their grandparents (a small Arabic-speaking Funj group of Muslims) were expelled in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century to outside the borders of the Kingdom of Sinnar due to their violent conflict over authority with the ruling group. Led by their king, Kundan (1726-1751), they headed towards the eastern Nuba Mountains. With the passage of time, they became a crossbred group, as their intermarriages with indigenous groups in that region produced the “Tagoi tribe” and its distinguishable language and culture.

When Kundan and his group had arrived at the eastern Nuba Mountains, they settled in what they later called “the Mount of Tagoi” together with the environing plains, which were all befitting farming, and grazing. A faction of Kundan’s group (the Sakarnga) relocated to the Gadyr Mountains, where they instituted a kingship from their own members. During the same period, settlers of the Mount of Tagoi gradually fragmented into three well-defined groups: the Tagoi Proper, the Tukom, and the Turjuk. After this



fragmentation, both the Tukom and Turjuk became subordinate to the authority of the adjacent Tegali Kingdom.

To demonstrate power and establish and maintain order, Kundan organised the Tagoi Proper group into more than thirty neighbourhoods on the top of the Mount of Tagoi. These neighbourhoods included: Tadyam, Tundoro, Taiimo, Tama Tudonj, Tayiin, Taybayh, Tubor, Tagambal, Tigir, Tao Dao, Talon, Tao Tugolan, Taglinbor, Toranj, Tugla, Tawongan, Tahrak, Tubgol Bart, Tazba, Tajrigan, Tabablinj, Tarinja, Taidong, Tukdongor, Idirinj, Ta Bakah, Kudru, Tabdiranj, Tagori, Tawbo, Tadammar, etc. (Ali, 2019, p. 29). All neighbourhoods were encircling the royal one (Al-Hoash) to provide security for the king. With a later debarkation onto the plains surrounding the Mount of Tagoi, these neighbourhoods were restructured with Arabicised names. For example, Tarawah supplanted Tama Tudonj, Al-Mansur supplanted Toranj, Ambayr supplanted Tajrigan, Toamah supplanted Tayiin, Faydh supplanted Kudru, Abu Al-Hassan supplanted Tao Dao (Ali, 2017, p. 90).

This article provides a historical analysis of the construction of the Tagoi Kingdom and the territorial issues that arose during this development, focussing on disputes over land and political authority. It investigates the mechanisms by which the Tagoi founded their territorial identity and political organisation, asserting their claim to autochthony drawn from longstanding settlement in the region, antedating the Hawazma, who began settling in the area in the 1940s during the rule of Hamdan Jabouri (1933–1968). The Tagoi's assertion of indigenous rights has been contested by the Hawazma and their allies—including Jallaba merchants and West African migrants (Barno, Bargo, and Fallata who were initially engaged in rain-fed farming and orchards in the Tagoi area). Both the Jallaba and West African migrants were drawn to the region by its fertile lands, rich pastures, and economic opportunities. These allied groups gradually constructed an independent native administration, openly opposing Tagoi political hegemony and amplifying conflict over vital resources such as land, pastures, and water. The article locates the conflict in a wider historical-political setting, stressing the undermining impacts of the Second Sudanese Civil War. This war was largely an extension of the first (1955–1972), a violent conflict between Sudan's northern and southern regions, in which the south strived for greater political representation and autonomous regional governance (Ali, 2016, p. 122). In addition, it emphasises the consequences of



the separation of South Sudan in 2011 and the long-lasting war between the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army-North (SPLM/A-N) and the Government of Sudan (GoS). These overarching dynamics have exacerbated the local resource-based conflict, transforming it into an entangled one with intertwined ethnic, political, and militarised dimensions. The article ultimately aims to explain how the Tagoi Kingdom was constructed, demarcated, and governed, and to identify the phases through which this territorial formation evolved.

Four key questions arise from the preceding statements: How was the Tagoi Kingdom constructed, governed, and territorially organised? How were borders demarcated and disputed? In what way did the Tagoi maintain their territorial identity and indigenous claims against competing groups? What impact did regional conflicts have on local authority and territorial disputes?

Quite a few studies have examined territorial construction and related dynamics in Sudan, notably the volume edited by Gertel, Rottenburg, and Calkins (2014). The volume investigates how territory and land are reshaped through investment, land grabbing, and resource extraction amid competing claims. Treating territory as a contested space shaped by identities, governance, livelihoods, and external interventions, it focuses on regions like Darfur, South Kordofan, Red Sea State, and Blue Nile. Omer (2020) explores how agribusiness expansion in Sudan's Gezira region transforms land claims and social relations, tracing contemporary investment patterns back to colonial and postcolonial legacies. Brass (2015) examines the Meroitic state's frontier dynamics, emphasising its engagement with peripheral pastoral communities and analysing how power, authority, and territorial control were negotiated in these zones. Young (2017) deals with how British colonial administrators thought about territory, planning, and statehood in Sudan between 1945 and 1951. Further insights are offered by Sjögren (2015) and Alredaisy(2024), whose works on identity, authority, and conflict address how internal divisions, identity-based claims, regionalism, and colonial legacies inform territorial imaginaries and pressures toward partition. The article at hand addresses a notable gap in all these studies by presenting a localised, precolonial-present, and historically grounded case study of territorial formation, governance, and border dynamics in the Nuba Mountains. Departing from prevalent perspectives oriented towards contemporary conflict, identity, or postcolonial politics,



it adopts a historical-anthropological lens to study indigenous frontier territorial construction dynamics rarely probed in previous research.

The article is an outcome of an extensive and multi-thematic anthropological field study conducted among the Tagoi over a five-year period (2012–2017), employing a qualitative narrative approach aimed at capturing the lived realities and remembered history. This included a total of approximately 100 in-depth group interview sessions and a comparable number of individual interviews, both open and unstructured. These sessions were carried out at different times and locations (in Khartoum, Omdurman, Faydh and Rashad) with males and females from various Tagoi kin-groups and professional backgrounds. These participants were predominantly middle-aged and elderly individuals who were born and raised in the Tagoi home area and consequently revealed a profound awareness of the local sociocultural and historical contexts. Notably, each group interview session included four to ten participants, with attendees frequently changing. The narratives attained from the individual and group interviews were meticulously recorded, transcribed, analysed, and interpreted, to derive recurrent patterns, meaningful insights and well-grounded conclusions. Secondary data from scholarly literature were used to complement the primary data collected through fieldwork, provide context and broader perspectives and hence deepen the understanding of the Tagoi's narratives. The selected literary works, published between 1935 and 2024, encompass different research outputs, including peer-reviewed journal articles, edited book chapters, institutional publications, and archival colonial-era ethnographies. The core themes revolve around concepts like territoriality, regional identity, spatial governance, and border studies. The geographical emphasis is largely on Africa—notably Sudan.

The Tagoi leadership, involving the king and a group of learned men, requested and provided support for recording their history and sociocultural heritage. This initiative was driven by growing concerns of knowledge loss resulting from a recent violence and the consequent mass migration from the eastern Nuba Mountains. Despite the study being grounded in ethically justified intentions, ensuring ethical integrity required securing broad community representation (to mitigate the influence of elite narratives), maintaining participant autonomy (to safeguard independent inquiry), and assuring informed, voluntary consent shielded from leadership pressure.



The article starts with a prelude overview of key concepts, followed by an exploration of the Tagoi from the colonial era to the present, presenting pivotal changes in their lives. It investigates the construction, expansion and demarcation of Tagoi territory during the British colonial period, the influx of newcomer groups, and the ensuing resource conflicts. It also reviews the impact of mechanised agriculture and civil wars, wrapping up with final reflections.

### **1. Core Intersecting Concepts Demystified**

Rather than committing to a fully developed theory, this article relies on a guiding conceptual framework composed of relevant, interrelated concepts along with their associated approaches and models. Together, these concepts act as a valid, fruitful base for probing the territorial construction dynamics, which are tackled in the present article. This conceptual approach matches the context-specific, issue-focussed, and exploratory nature of the article and its questions, and it enables meticulous inquiry.

#### **1.1 Territory, land and terrain**

Territory is a historically contingent social process that becomes institutionalised as part of a wider regional transformation. It may de-institutionalise, merging with other regional spaces or dissolving into small units (Paasi, 2011, pp. 10-11, 14). It exists in three approaches: as a given administrative unit that provides a spatial frame for the phenomena or processes; as a construct, the product of a research process; or as social practices and discourses, conditioning and conditioned by politics, culture, economy, governance, and power relations (Paasi, 2010, pp. 2297-2300).

Territory construction involves four stages: territorial shaping (making of boundaries), symbolic shaping (naming/other symbols), institutional shaping (institutions producing/reproducing other shapes) and the establishment of the territory as part of the regional system and social consciousness (regional identity). These shapes are produced and reproduced in the perpetual structuration of practices and discourses of economy, politics, governance, culture, media, and education (Marek, 2022, p. 81; Semian & Chromý, 2014, p. 264).

Land is a scarce and disputed asset subject to regulation, acquisition, measurement, and demarcation, standing as a key issue in economic and political spheres. A related term is 'terrain', which is land that has a strategic, political, and military sense. It is a relation of power, with a heritage in geology and the military, the control of which allows the



establishment of order. As a ‘field’, a site of work or battle, it is a political-strategic question. Territory is closely related to land or terrain, but is more than merely land, and goes beyond terrain, and is a rendering of the concept of ‘space’ as a political category (Elden, 2010, pp. 806-810; Elden, 2013, p. 7).

Territory needs understanding through its relation to space. This entails a thorough re-examination of the established concept of territory as a ‘bounded space’, given that this definition is based on taken-for-granted assumptions about both space and boundaries. Territory serves as a political instrument, involving techniques for land measurement and terrain control. The dynamic relationship between measurement and control—technical and legal dimensions—requires analysis alongside economic and strategic principles linked to land and terrain. Territory is historically contingent, essentially mutable. It is also a geographical concept, operating as a basis for organising spatial relations and interactions and exhibiting deep asymmetries in its materialisation. Ultimately, territory functions concurrently as a term, a conceptual construct, and an embodied practice. It is a political question, but in a broad sense: economic, strategic, legal, and technical, four registers that are crucial in addressing the political and historical specificities of territory (Tobiasz-Lis & Wojcik, 2021, pp. 66, 70; Elden, 2010, pp. 799-801, 804, 811-812).

Territory then should not be understood as the static container of political actions or the passive object of political struggle. It is something shaped by, and a shaper of, continual processes of transformation, regulation, and governance. Questions of division, bordering, contestation and conquest, ownership and extraction of resources, colonisation, measurement and quantification, threat and defence all have territorial elements (Elden, 2013, p. 17).

## 1.2 Territorialisation, territoriality and territorialism

Territories are made, given meanings, and destroyed; they are typically contested and actively negotiated, and historically contingent. We understand this (un)making of territory as “territorialisation”, which is about the power-laden exercise of effective sovereignty (Boeckler, Engel, & Müller-Mahn, 2018, pp. 6-7). Here, territoriality is a set of actions aiming to demarcate a space, bringing about compartmentalisation of social life. Every division resulting from this process has an identity affected by natural variables, economy, language, politics, culture, or religion. In its broadest sense, territoriality is the organisational tenet for exerting sociopolitical power in a defined space (Yilmaz, 2018, pp. 133, 134, 147; Paasi, et al., 2022, p. 1). It is the attempt



to control people, phenomena, and relationships, by delimiting and controlling a geographical area (Faludi, 2013, pp. 1307-1308).

Three approaches explain the roots of territoriality. The first perceives territoriality as natural, caused by basic instincts we are born with. The second emphasises sociocultural and psychological factors affecting such actions. The third evaluates human territoriality as rational strategy in demarcating and establishing control over an area (Yilmaz, 2018, pp. 134-136, 139; Boeckler, Engel, & Müller-Mahn, 2018, pp. 4-5). Also, there are three main forms of territoriality-producing actions: (1) Classification of geographical space, which distinguishes a space from others and arranges relations among individuals or groups. (2) Communication, which assumes markers (such as border poles and fortifications) at the ending points of demarcated space, carrying a message for outsiders. (3) Attempt at enforcing over access to the area and to things within it. In addition, there are two main functions of territorial actions: (1) Spatial control, which is to claim and control a territorialised space. (2) Differentiation and identification of demarcated space, which transmit messages to in- and outsiders (Yilmaz, 2018, pp. 142-147, 150).

Therefore, territory is produced through the interplay of land, terrain, law, and techniques, components that represent political-economic, political-strategic, political-legal, and political-technical relations. It is not simply a result of territoriality, which implies a naturalised demarcation and leaves out crucial socio-historical and geographical aspects in territory development. As territory comprises techniques for measuring land and controlling terrain, it constitutes a political technology which materialises at the border (Boeckler, Engel, & Müller-Mahn, 2018, p. 5).

Territorialism stands for seeing territories-as-containers as the building blocks for the organisation of macro-space and these building blocks as subject to government control, or state territoriality. It means macrosocial space being seen as wholly organised in terms of units such as districts. Each unit is thought to be a container, a view inherent to the classic notion of territory as an area that has been appropriated, with borders marking the limits of control (Faludi, 2013, pp. 1303-1305).

### **1.3 Borders and borderlands**

Borders are material strategies to link territory and sovereignty and to control the movement of people and things. They may be sorted into three identifiable types. These include natural borders, which are marked by



physical formations like rivers or mountain ranges; artificial borders, established through straight-line delimitations typically portrayed as linear boundaries on maps or nautical charts or defined by curvilinear tracks following latitudinal lines; and cultural borders, which approximate the boundaries between the homelands of cultural communities. Also, borders serve three main roles: establishing order via the configuration of authority domains, preserving the safety of inhabitants within territories from outsider infringement, and promoting structured regulation and governance of population coupled with the effective management of natural resources (Abiodun, 2021, pp. 14-15; Adesina, 2019, pp. 202-204; Boeckler, Engel, & Müller-Mahn, 2018, pp. 11-12).

In Paulina Ochoa Espejo's "Watershed Model", watershed zones function as a physical landscape metaphor for both territory and borders. In this framework, water emanates from ridges into rivers and streams, ultimately draining into lakes, reservoirs, and subsequently the ocean. In the same way, territories contain landforms, ecological systems, and human settlements. For the "Watershed Model", territories, like watersheds, are connected and interdependent. As water streams and circulates, establishing sole ownership over it is challenging—this likewise concerns territories. Accordingly, the model anchors territorial rights on local governance bodies regulating resource utilisation and collective actions (Paasi, et al., 2022, p. 7).

Related to borders are borderlands, which are boundaries in depth, space around a line. Borders and their proximate areas are mutually constitutive. Borders function as institutional frameworks that can be deliberately leveraged, whereas borderlands constitute areas of politico-economic potential for the residents. Borderlands are depicted as subnational areas where socioeconomic interactions are markedly impacted by their closeness to an international border. They are also described as zones in which people have recognisable configurations of relationships with others inside that zone, on both sides of the borderline but within the cultural landscape of the borderlands (Abiodun, 2021, p. 14; Adesina, 2019, pp. 202, 207).

## 2. Tagoi Territory: Ultimately Failed Construction Efforts

The Tagoi draw their perception of social life from their tribe's politico-administrative hierarchy. In the past, this hierarchy extended from the king down to his advisors and then their subjects; currently, it extends from the *amir* down to the *omdas* and *sheikhs* and then their subjects. They described this political hierarchy through a location-based model founded on the



Mount of Tagoi. In this model, the dwellings of the king and his lineage occupy the top, the residences of the king's advisors are located on the mid-slope, and those belonging to the common people rest at the foot of the hill. This tiered structure is analogically extended to the building design of the conical hut roof, which informants understand as a tangible representation of the authority structure and the spatial residential pattern. In a structural sense, the hut roof is bolstered by four principal vertical wooden posts connected by three horizontal circular bonds. Each of these bonds corresponds to a specific tier within the politico-administrative hierarchy: the king (*jittar*), the king's advisors (*jindi*), and the general populace (*yidro*).

During the reign of Adam Jabouri (1910-1933), the Tagoi native administration intended to demarcate the Tagoi territory across its geographical expanse, using this holistic perception. They applied the same principles used in building hut roofs and residential areas on the Mount of Tagoi to delineate borders with neighbouring tribes, placing Tagoi families from different social strata in scattered hills along these borders. A few nuclear families from the royal kin group were sent to these border sites as pioneer settlers, taking on the roles of authority and guardianship over the land. Shortly thereafter, some families of the king's advisors were dispatched to inhabit the lower levels of the royal families' dwellings, succeeded by the relocation of some commoner families to the lowest slopes of the hills, where they became subject to the earlier arrivals. Following that, Adam Jabouri publicly proclaimed the Tagoi territory as the proprietary domain of the tribe and enacted a tax collection system for non-Tagoi persons passing through or residing within its borders. Accordingly, the authorities aimed to reproduce the landscape of the Mount of Tagoi in the edge-of-territory hills as a groundwork in demarcating the kingdom's borders, thereby maintaining the lasting presence of social stratification within the Tagoi tribal society.

Gedayl Jabouri (1897–1910) launched a vigorous Tagoi revolt against the British colonial rule in the eastern Nuba Mountains until his apprehension and subsequent execution in 1910. Later that same year, to restore order to the region, British colonial officials appointed his brother, Adam Jabouri, as king. Prior to Adam Jabouri's reign, the Tagoi territory had not been under any regional governing authority. Following his appointment, the colonial administration established control over the region, incorporating it into Sudan. As a result, Adam Jabouri was obligated to delineate the borders of



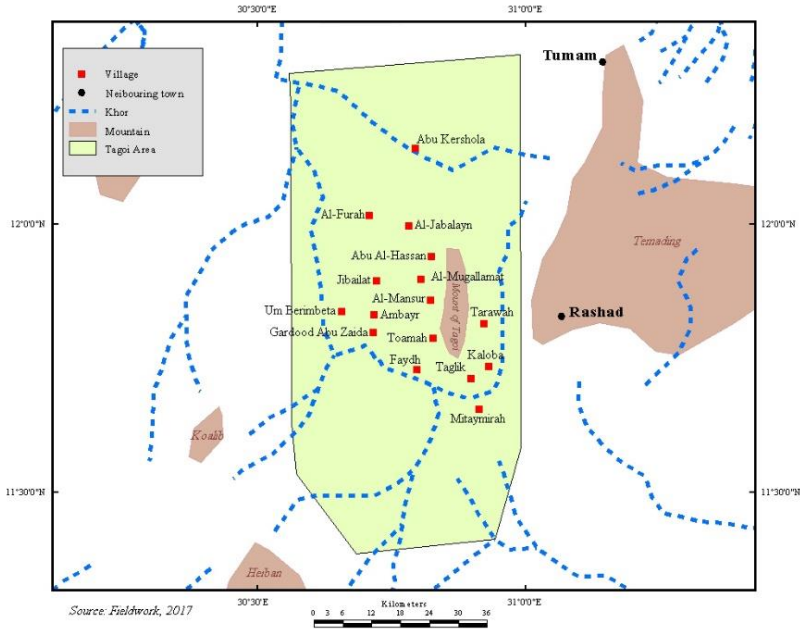
the Tagoi kingdom. Remarkably, the Tagoi recall that at the outset of their ancestors' departure from the mountain, the adjacent plains were unoccupied and seen as a component of the Tagoi territory. Nonetheless, the establishment of the expanded kingdom framework was only partially completed after the border demarcation. Drawing a parallel to the process of constructing the hut roof, many informants emphasise that the kingdom's core building blocks failed to connect all its structural components and levels.

Precisely in that sense, a culturally guided delineation of borders was done to secure property rights and control access to land and its natural resources while regulating non-Tagoi presence. The borders were seen as vital political and military assets, helping to establish and preserve social order. It was not only an act of setting physical boundaries, but also a sociopolitical tool to compartmentalise life and legitimise territorial sovereignty. This strategy reflected a territoriality approach in which controlling land, resources, and human relationships was central to maintaining power. The Tagoi's territorial efforts served to influence behaviour by controlling access, ensuring the safety and stability necessary for fulfilling the needs of the local communities, and asserting authority both within and outside the demarcated space.

During the British colonial rule (1899-1956), the Tagoi were added to the Tegali kingdom, which had extended over most of the eastern Nuba Mountains, before it was transformed into a rural district council in 1947 (Kenrick, 1948, pp. 144-150). By then, all Tagoi families had already moved from their hilltop settlements following their king's directive (Hamdan Jabouri, 1933-1968) and inhabited villages located several miles out on the plains (see Map 1, below). The shift from the hilltops to more accessible, arable lowlands was inspired by a multifaceted combination of factors, comprising security concerns and changing socioeconomic and political conditions. These included overpopulation strain, repeated epidemics, and the necessity of modernised infrastructure such as hospitals, schools, and markets. Other factors were the imperative to preserve land from external threats, the initiation of rain-fed cotton cultivation on the plains, and the establishment of a cotton gin in Um Berimbeta in 1936, as inscribed on the facility's foundation stone.



### Map (1): Geographic placement of the Tagoi villages



Historically, the Tagoi sought refuge from a range of threats, including intertribal violent conflicts, attacks by cattle-raising nomads, and slave raids during the Turkish colonial period (1821-1885), leading them to settle in hills. However, the British colonial authority's strong control drove out the Tagoi and other Nuba groups from their hilltop homesteads, reduced intertribal conflicts, and set up measures that facilitated the shift toward lowland cultivation (e.g. promotion of rain-fed cotton cultivation and educational development). These changes fostered a limited cash economy, led to the expansion of agriculture into the lowlands, and ultimately reshaped the natural landscapes and the social organisations of the Nuba peoples. Additionally, betterments in water resources and infrastructure, such as graded roads connecting commercial centres to the railway line, sped up this overall changeover. Henceforth, the Tagoi have undergone substantial socioeconomic and political changes, adopted new lifestyles, and engaged more with the neighbouring tribal groups and the wider Sudanese society.

Since South Sudan's secession in 2011, the Tagoi have dwelt adjacent to a "hard border," enduring sustained sociocultural marginalisation. Their area



has remained militarised, marginalised, and lacking cross-border interaction. It has been reduced to a frontier area and transitioned to a borderland—a subnational region. Its socioeconomic and political life is now affected by proximity to the new Sudan-South Sudan international border. It could be described as a “zero borderland”—a landscape where people on both sides of a border are opposed ideologically, culturally, or religiously (Adesina, 2019, pp. 207-208). Since 2011, the Tagoi have been participating heavily in the civil strife, with a sizable number aligning with the SPLM/A-N. Official counter-insurgency measures in the surrounding area have had profound impacts on the Tagoi, causing them to be widely displaced and dispersed throughout multiple areas of Sudan. Most of their villages have been depopulated. Only the royal kin-group (i.e. *iyal Jabouri*) are currently residing in the Tagoi’s capital, Faydh. Tribal law strictly forbids the king and his kin from moving out of the kingdom’s territory at any time or condition.

In brief, the colonial incorporation of the Tagoi territory into the freshly constituted state of Sudan laid the groundwork of its demarcation. This was instigated by some territorial concerns, namely the urgency to secure land rights, control access to natural resources, regulate the entry and stay of non-citizens, maintain social order, compartmentalise social life, and affirm territorial sovereignty. This demarcation mimicked the Tagoi tribe’s politico-administrative structure, applying the same principles of building huts and living quarters. However, this territorial construction remained unfinished and unconsolidated. Over time, the Tagoi began living in a militarised zero borderland—deficient in cross-border interaction, marginalised, and caught in a lengthy civil war that depopulated their villages.

### **3. Newcomer Groups and the Initial Resource Conflicts in Tagoi Territory**

Because of the porosity of its borders and the repeated population outflows, the Tagoi territory—with the passage of time—has become a partially free area for settlement by many cattle-herding groups (like the Hawazma and the Ambararo). Many Tagoi informants assert that their native administrators following the reign of Adam Jabouri, the ‘demarcator’ of their territory, granted these newly arrived nomadic groups time-bound rights to settle on and cultivate certain plots of land—lands that these groups have lately started to claim as theirs. During the same period, immigration



brought other smaller farmer groups such as the Barno, Bargo, Fallata, and Masalit into the Tagoi territory, where they engaged in rain-fed farming and horticulture. Moreover, camel-herders, such as the Shanabla, commenced passage through Tagoi territory as part of their seasonal transhumance. They migrate seasonally between their autumn pasturelands (*makharif*) in North Kordofan and summer pastures (*masayif*) in South Kordofan or South Sudan's Upper Nile region.

Notwithstanding these facts, the Tagoi informants portray their territory nowadays as predominantly inhabited by the Tagoi people. Only certain areas are cohabited by the newly arrived groups, namely the Hawazma, Barno, Bargo, Fallata, and Masalit. Initially, peaceful coexistence and mutual reciprocity characterised the relationships between the Tagoi and these groups. The Hawazma, for instance, frequently delegated the care of their families to their Tagoi neighbours while migrating southward with their livestock. Acting in return also, the Tagoi provided cultivable land tracts and in-home crop stores ("*wentefrang*" in Tagoi language; "*sowaybat*" in Sudanese Arabic). As a reciprocal arrangement, the Tagoi entrusted their cows to the Hawazma for care next to their own livestock. These exchanges were emboldened by strong personal relations, with the Hawazma partaking in both celebratory and sorrowful occasions with the Tagoi. The Tagoi also used to give short-term accommodations in certain areas of their territory known as "*garadid*"—dunes or semi-laterised clay loam soils usually extending from north to south. The Tagoi portrayed the *garadid* as areas dominated by termite mounds and large trees, which they perceived as habitations of harmful spirits. The Tagoi depict the north-south direction of the *garadid* as ominous and connected to demonic activities, leading them—later with the escalation of conflicts over land and political authority—to associate the Hawazma and their cattle with demons, further demonising them. However, the Tagoi authorities granted the Hawazma temporary access to the *garadid* for overnight stays, as these areas were considered uninhabitable and unsuitable for farming. The underlying conflict, though, was not over the *garadid* themselves, but rather over arable land and residential zones. While the *garadid* could be granted for limited terms, the Tagoi perceived them as integral to their ancestral land and for this reason restricted permanent settlement in these areas.

According to Tagoi informants, the Hawazma historically followed a "*mirhal*" (nomadic migratory route; plural: "*marahel*"), which originates



from their home area of Al-Hammadi in the north and proceeds southward, passing through Kadero, Kortala, and AljibalAlsitta along the western border of the Tagoi area. The *mirhal* then runs west of Kawalib and Sheibun, east of Kadugli, and reaches its end at Bahr Al-Arab. Nonetheless, since 1970s, the Hawazma started new *marheel*, which pass through the Tagoi territory from north to south. While the Tagoi inhabited the Mount of Tagoi, the Hawazma utilised the nearby lowland areas for grazing their herds (Ali, 2016, p. 126). Following the Tagoi's embarkment into these areas, the Hawazma, with smaller nomadic groups, started to reside nearby. Around this time, these nomadic smaller groups took alternative *marheel* passing through the Tagoi territory, as they seasonally migrated between their *masayif* in the fertile savannahs and their *makharif* in the more arid savannahs in pursuit of forage and water sources. Over time, as these nomadic groups expanded, many of their families began to claim land with the intention of settling permanently in the Tagoi territory.

Under Adam Jabouri's rule, the organisation of *marheel* for nomadic groups traversing the Tagoi area began. The *marheel* were formalised corridors, containing assigned ingress and egress points, nighttime resting spots, and passageways, all overseen by the Tagoi administration to deter nomadic herds from encroaching on cultivated fields and other Tagoi premises. Um Berimbeta acted as a vital link in these transit routes, marking the beginning of access for the Hawazma as they migrated southward to the southern Nuba Mountains or the northern areas of South Sudan. As soon as they arrived, the Hawazma were required to send a delegate to the Tagoi king to report their headcount and settle the transit dues. Only upon completion of this official protocol did the Tagoi king give consent for well-digging and pasture access along the prescribed *marheel*. At the commencement of the rainy season, the Hawazma would set out on their journey back toward North Kordofan via the same routes. At the present time, three major *marheel* used by the Hawazma trek through Tagoi territory. The first route cuts across non-cultivable zones, beginning at Um Berimbeta and passing through Toamah, Tajmalah, and Tandawah. The second also originates in Um Berimbeta, runs along the eastern edge of the Tarawah agricultural zone, and follows the western side of the Rashad farming areas. The third route has its beginning in Um Berimbeta, moves through Al-Rihaynah and Al-Awaja, flows adjacent to Hajar Yasin by Ambayr, and then continues its course along the Sharie Alhawa levelled road right to Talodi (Ali, 2016, p. 127).



Initial tensions between the Tagoi and the nomadic groups primarily involved limited farmer-herder conflicts over resource access. They were addressable through existing conflict mitigation systems. For example, when animals entered cultivated fields beyond a nomadic migratory route, the subsequent conflict was regularly handled by a committee of tribal representatives appointed locally by an *omda* or a *sheikh*. If such a committee could not resolve the dispute, it was referred to the police for legal processing under the Sudanese criminal law.

To put it in a few words, the Tagoi native administrators granted newly arrived groups non-permanent residency rights on lands classified as uninhabitable and poor-quality agricultural lands. These groups were permitted to till cultivable plots, dig wells, and utilise pastures lying along the nomadic migratory routes—areas traditionally regulated by the administrators as integral to the Tagoi Territory. Initially characterised by peaceful coexistence and mutual reciprocity, relationships between the Tagoi and the newcomers underwent a gradual change as the number of migratory routes multiplied and the newcomers' population extended. Eventually, most of these groups initiated formal claims to land ownership, resulting in the appearance and aggravation of resource-based conflicts.

#### **4. The Impact of Mechanised Agriculture and Civil Wars**

The Tagoi have recently faced substantial loss of access to their arable and grazing lands owing to land-grabbing, propelled by expanding agricultural schemes introduced by the Nimeiri government in 1978. These schemes spanned more than 50,000 acres in areas like Um Lubia—located in the southernmost zone of the Tagoi territory between Faydh and the borderline with the Liri and the Tira, and Rideena, which lies in the western part, between the Mount of Tagoi and the border with the Kawalib. These schemes attracted more waves of newcomer groups, including Hawazma, Bargo, Barno, Fallata, and Masalit and brought a major shift in the patterns of land ownership and usage. They replaced established Tagoi agricultural lands, many of which had been left unused over time, with some later claimed by nomads and others or repurposed for cash crops like cotton. Additionally, agriculturally viable areas such as Um Berimbeta and Waykaya were taken over by the Hawazma's native administration.

Based on accounts from Tagoi informants, the height of exploitation by newcomer groups happened during the Nimeiri regime (1969–1985). During this period, these groups secured control over regional governance



by aligning with the Sudanese Socialist Union—the sole state-sanctioned political party at that historical moment. This alignment enabled the newcomer groups to assume a position of authority and a central role in mechanised agricultural development in Rideena and Um Lubia, where land distribution was influenced by each group's financial strength. Financially capable of purchasing land, members of these newcomer groups took possession of sizable areas. By comparison, the Tagoi, even after appealing to the relevant authorities, were unable to purchase land due to financial constraints.

From the eruption of the Second Sudanese Civil War, security challenges have impeded both the Ambararo and the Hawazma from accessing their *masayif* lying across what is currently the Sudan-South Sudan international border. In response, the Ambararo shifted their *masayif* to the Liri area in South Kordofan, but they keep moving through Tagoi territory without taking up permanent residence. The Shanabla, in contrast, did not have a history of migration beyond the current international border of South Sudan, typically halting their southward movement in the Kabus area, South Kordofan. As a result, they faced no need to adjust. Conversely, the Hawazma had no choice but to pursue other options. Some Hawazma established dense settlements in three areas—Faydh, Um Berimbeta, and Abu Kershola—where they began purchasing parcels of Tagoi land, keeping them as private ownership.

Drawing on data obtained through interviews, the Tagoi perceive the Hawazma's response strategy to the new security and political changes as a calculated move to take control of land and political authority. This strategy involved settling in the historically recognised Tagoi territory and displacing its native inhabitants through militarisation and alignment with militias backed by the Government of Sudan in its conflict with the SPLM/A-N rebels in South Kordofan. In response, many young Tagoi men have joined the SPLM/A-N to get military training and means to defend their land. Many of these young insurgents were recruited into the SPLM/A-N following the Hawazma assault on Tagoi in April 2011. They hailed from different social backgrounds within the Tagoi communities. Driven by the affiliation of Abdel Aziz Al-Hilo—an influential SPLM/A-N figure having Tagoi roots—and the enlisting of many Tagoi male youth into the SPLM/A-N, the government started seeing the Tagoi as enemies. Consequently, the government lent heavy political and military backing to the Hawazma,



treating them as strategic partners in the region. As such, the political mobilisation in the Tagoi area underwent polarisation along "government-versus-opposition" lines. Ongoing local, resource-based conflicts escalated across the region, turning it into a battleground marked by armed conflict, robbery, and other forms of mass violence, generating widespread insecurity and mass displacement of the population.

To strengthen their opposition to the Tagoi, the Hawazma allied with the Barno, Fallata, and Bargo—jointly referred to as “Al-Halafa”—driven by a shared goal of obtaining title to land. Notably, despite the long history of land-related disputes with the Tagoi—particularly in the Ambayr area—the Masalit have opted not to join this alliance. This stance may be attributed to their longstanding presence in the Tagoi areas and their extensive integration through shared residence and intermarriage.

Previously, in the reign of Adam Jabouri (1910–1933), the Hawazma were bestowed a “*mandobia*” (representative office) with restricted powers, allowing their chief to act as a delegate of the Tagoi king. However, in 1995, under the National Salvation Government, this *mandobia* was upgraded to an autonomous political unit, officially designated as “*Emarat Al-Halafa*,” with Um Berimbeta as its administrative centre. This coincided with a political party switch, as numerous members of the group, previously affiliated with the Ansar Al-Mahdi and Umma Party, began to support the governing National Congress Party and took an important role in pro-government militias. This alteration happened concurrently with a restructuring of the conventional Tagoi politico-administrative setup, wherein the autochthonous king-and-advisers model was supplanted by the *amir-omdas-sheikhs* model that is prevalent across several Sudanese tribal communities. Introduced by the South Kordofan government in 1995, this restructuring relabelled all regional kings as “*amirs*” and their advisers as “*omdas*” and “*sheikhs*” based on their ranks. It was a sort of reform intended to achieve a form of parity among the kingdoms and principalities in South Kordofan, standardising their socio-political power and rights to land.

As stated by Tagoi informants, the core distinction between the *Emarat Al-Halafa* and the *Emarat Tagoi* resides in their governance models. The first administers nomadic groups bestowed solely the right of usufruct on the land along *maracheel* routes, mainly for grazing and cultivation purposes, whereas the second manages settled populations having both possession and utilisation rights over land. This contention over the nature of the two forms



of native governance has fuelled the escalating conflict between the Tagoi and the Hawazma and their allies (Al-Halafa). Tagoi informants argue that granting Al-Halafa an independent administration in line with theirs implies co-ownership of land, which they perceive as a direct threat to their territorial rights.

In a nutshell, the Tagoi encountered substantial loss of arable and grazing lands during two governing regimes in Sudan. Under the Nimeiri regime, newcomer groups with active political participation established authority and took possession of sizable portions of land within expanding mechanised agricultural schemes. Their settlements increased during the National Salvation regime, with which they forged a reciprocal alliance that enabled shared political-military support. During the surge of the civil war and the secession of South Sudan, these newcomer groups consolidated control over both land and political authority. They gained a foothold in the Tagoi territory by displacing the indigenous residents through militarisation and alignment with government-backed militias. Main tactics employed in realising these outcomes included joining forces with other newly arrived groups, promoting native self-administration, and changing political affiliations.

### **5. Main Findings and Discussion**

As noted, following the embarkment of the Tagoi from hilltops into the surrounding flatlands, efforts were made to demarcate the kingdom's external borders using mountain chains dispersed along the boundaries of the homelands of neighbouring tribal communities, and internal borders shaped by sand dunes and nomadic migratory routes within the Tagoi bounded territorial space. Here, territoriality as a rational strategy was evident in the sense that a set of actions were being undertaken to demarcate and establish control over a defined geographical space. This course of action also brought about the compartmentalisation of internal social life—for instance, a specific subspace was assigned and classified for each Tagoi kin-group and for each non-Tagoi nomadic group. The formation of the modern Sudanese nation-state under the British colonial rule sparked territorial concerns, necessitating this demarcation process. This process was partly intended to link territory and sovereignty, establish and maintain order, control the mobility of nomads and the access to natural resources, ensure proper management of citizens, structure existing relationships, and reflect the local social stratification. This process was embedded in narratives, as



the Tagoi reinterpreted history, revived old borders, while establishing symbolic shapes and institutions.

Over time, nomadic and farmer groups began to arrive in the Tagoi territory with non-permanent usufruct rights on mostly uninhabitable and poor-quality agricultural lands and along nomadic migratory routes. As these routes multiplied and the newcomers' populations and settlements extended, these groups acquired political authority and land ownership, particularly under the Nimeiri and National Salvation political regimes. In this context, the territory the Tagoi built over nearly three centuries has started to ruin due to factors including armed conflicts, land grabs for agricultural investment, influence of the Government of Sudan on native administrative systems, and mass population inflows and outflows. With the passage of time, the Tagoi have endured significant losses in terms of political authority, territorial control, human population and land in their historic territory. Customary land tenure, indigenous intertribal boundary arrangements, and the power to restrict or permit the movement of nomads have ceased to be acknowledged within the present socioeconomic and political setting. Their territory proved to be historically contingent social process that had been repeatedly institutionalised and then de-institutionalised, merging with and separating from other regional spaces, as part of wider regional transformations. This is to say, the Tagoi kingdom underwent a full cycle of territorialisation: it was constructed, imbued with meaning, contested and negotiated, and ultimately destroyed.

Building on the referenced scholarly literature cited at the beginning of this article, it could be maintained that the Tagoi territory was once both an administrative unit and social practices and discourses, conditioning and conditioned by politics, culture, economy, governance, and power relations. Its emergence is attributable to a combination of factors, including population mobility, intermarriages, and territorial ambitions of hegemonic political entities spanning the region from the eastern Nuba Mountains to the Blue Nile areas. It was always a dynamic historical formation—produced, mutable, and flexible—emerging from the continuous reconstruction of the spatial fabric of social life. From the outset, it experienced repeated fragmentation and disintegration, while shifting between dependence on and autonomy from other regional sociopolitical formations. In line with the Watershed Model, it was interconnected, interdependent, and open to the outside. It was the sum of a nested



hierarchy of bounded spaces and an extended form of governance in an old kind of defensive and non-aspirational territoriality. (Re)ordering practices in the form of ‘doll in a doll’ were taking place both locally and in the immediate extended region.

### **Conclusion**

The findings respond to the article’s core questions about the Tagoi Kingdom’s territorial construction, governance, and border dynamics; the durability of indigenous identity and land claims under external pressures; and the impact of regional conflicts on local authority and land disputes. The construction of the Tagoi Kingdom emerges as a historically contingent and dynamic process, moulded by intersecting sociopolitical forces. Governance operated through hierarchically organised kin-based compartments; while borders—originally demarcated to enforce sovereignty and regulate mobility within the nascent Sudanese state—later became contested due to nomadic influxes and changing regional political regimes. This demarcation sought to manage resources and mirror local hierarchies, but was ultimately eroded by external pressures, including state-imposed land policies, population shifts, and investment-fuelled land grabs. The maintenance of territorial identity rested on symbolic institutions, customary landholding, social hierarchies, and regulation of nomadic presence. However, state interventions and local conflicts sidelined or disrupted these mechanisms, impairing the capability to keep territorial identity extant. Regional conflicts further sabotage the Tagoi’s ancestral political authority and administrative structures, yielding broken traditional institutions and eroded territorial rights and identity. This process eventually completed the territorialisation cycle, from construction to destruction.

Overall, the article shows that despite their resilience, indigenous territorial construction, identity and governance remain susceptible to prolonged external pressures—chiefly those from state policies and regional conflicts. Such forces could ultimately lead to the disintegration of traditional systems of authority and land management. These findings add to the earlier-cited scholarship of Omer (2020), Brass (2015), Young (2017), Sjögren (2015), Alredaisy(2024), Gertel, Rottenburg and Calkins (2014), which jointly enhance our insights into how territory in Sudan has been shaped over time by governance practices, competing claims, and external interventions.



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