



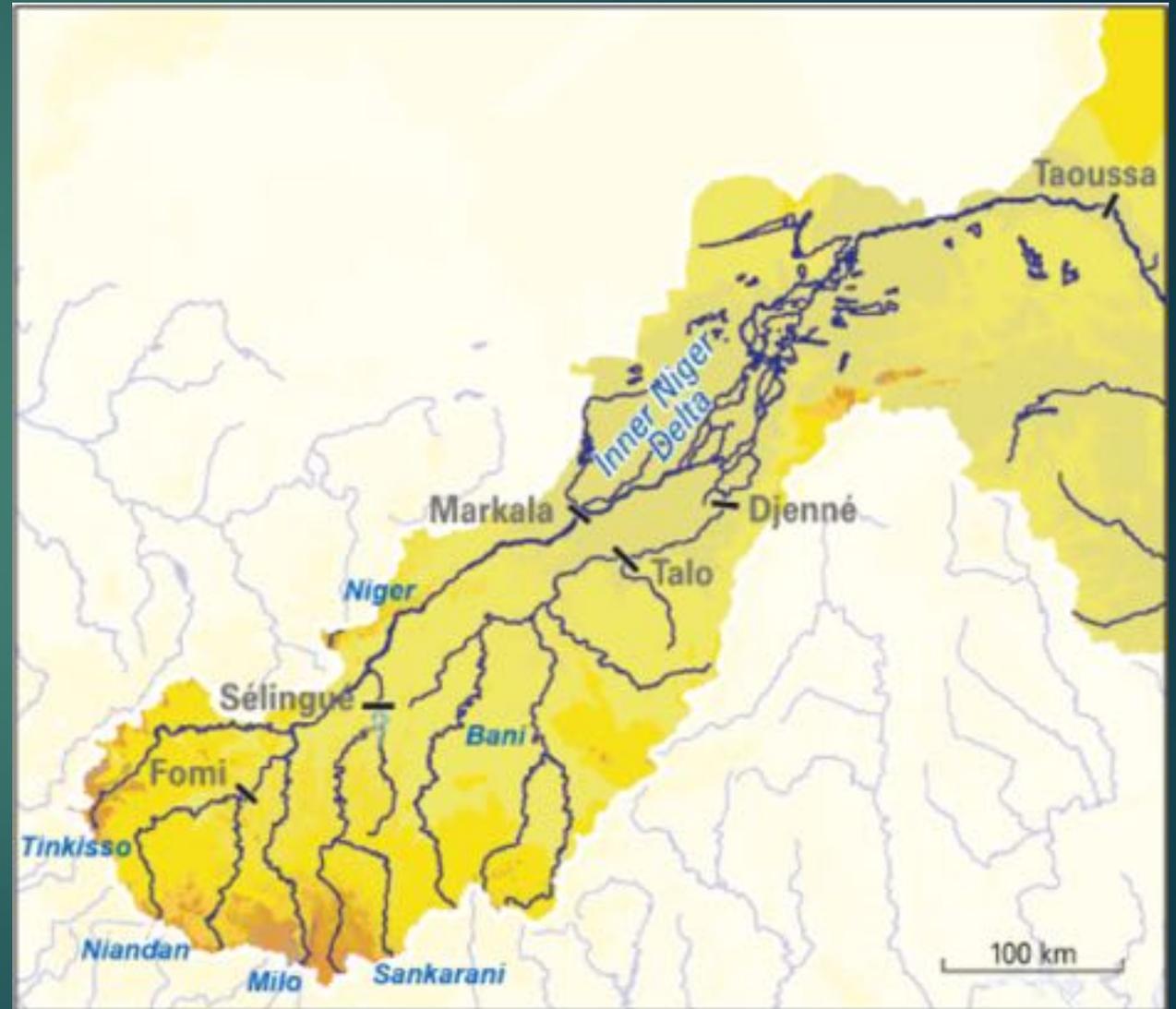
# The Middle Niger Valley

DANCES OF THE BLACKSMITHS & THE CULTIVATORS

© Ofosuwa M. Abiola, 2019  
All rights reserved

# Middle Niger Civilizations

- ▶ In roughly 2100 BCE, people residing in the valleys surrounding the Niger River floodplains – in what would be modern Mali – were establishing the foundations for a non-centralized urban center.
- ▶ Subsistence specialization had existed in the area since around 3000 BCE.



- ▶ By 1500 BCE the specializations in the Middle Niger Civilizations became more elaborate.
- ▶ By 500 BCE, clusters of cities began to be witnessed.
- ▶ By 250 BCE Jenne-Jeno became the urban center for the countless city clusters that emerged.



# An Ancient Urbanized Civilization

- ▶ The Middle Niger populations developed into large dense cities.
- ▶ Historians, archeologists, and other scholars previously believed that Egypt was the only urbanized polity in Africa's ancient past.
- ▶ However, it is now known that the Middle Niger Civilization was a major urbanized civilization.
- ▶ It was enormous in size and population.
- ▶ The crafts produced there were sophisticated, and the goods manufactured there were extremely abundant.

# Size is Everything



- ▶ The Middle Niger Civilization exerted control over the more than 65,637 square miles of the Niger River's interior floodplains, and arable land in the same proportions.
- ▶ The pharaohs of Egypt's control was limited to the little more than 13,127 square miles of the Nile floodplain, and roughly 19,691 square miles of cultivatable land.
- ▶ In addition to the large and dense populations that existed in the Middle Niger, there was no centralized government – it was a heterarchy.
- ▶ Three specialists were the glue that held this colossal urban complex together.

# Specialists: The Blacksmiths

- ▶ Blacksmiths are metal workers whose specialty is iron.
- ▶ Due to the nature of iron smelting – the smoldering heat, strength, and care needed – the profession was intimately tied to religious or spiritual systems.
- ▶ It was believed that only those close to the divine could manage such a profession.
- ▶ All religious systems contained dances.
- ▶ Because of the mystery equated with iron smelting, the blacksmiths also created secret societies where they performed full body mask or masquerade dances.



# Specialists: The Cultivators

- ▶ The cultivators were the farmers.
- ▶ They grew food on plots of land and therefore fostered a relationship with nature and the cosmos.
- ▶ Cultivators created dances that effected crop yield.



# Specialists: Traders



- ▶ The traders were the middle-men.
- ▶ They did not produce metal, food, or anything else.
- ▶ They made their living selling and bartering other specialists' commodities.

# No King Here

- ▶ Because The Middle Niger Civilization was a heterarchy, there were no kings – everyone was equal.
- ▶ Issues were decided by vote.
- ▶ The clusters of dense cities were held together by the activities of the traders, cultivators, and blacksmiths.
- ▶ The blacksmiths made all the farming tools, weapons, ceremonial masks and other religious paraphernalia, knives, etc.
- ▶ Traders would obtain goods from the specialists and travel from town to town selling the products.
- ▶ However, the traders did not engage in dance.

