

# SOCIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF SELECTED SURNAMES IN THE KHASSONKE AREA

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## **Abstract:**

*Khasso is a geographical, territorial, linguistic and historical entity in Mali. It has played a major role in Mali's history. However, there are still many areas of research to be explored, including onomastics in general and patronymics in particular. It is in this perspective of being able to fill this void that the present study falls. It seeks to identify certain patronymics in the Khassonke area and then explain their origins. After our fieldwork, we were able to draw many conclusions from the many versions we had heard of the history of Khasso, thanks to the etymology of the various surnames. Participant interviews were used to gather information in the communes of Logo, Hawa Dembaya, Sero and Diamou. The results show that surnames in Khasso are based on family transmission, i.e. belonging to the genealogical line revealing the perpetuation of filiation, and on geographical variability indicating that the bearers of surnames belong to a given locality or region.*

**Key words:** *Anthroponymy, Khassonke, Onomastics, Patronymy.*

## **Résumé :**

*Le Khasso constitue une entité géographique, territoriale, linguistique et historique du Mali. Il a joué un très grand rôle dans l'histoire du Mali. Ce faisant, beaucoup de domaines de recherches sur cette zone reste à explorer*

*parmi lesquels l'onomastique d'une façon générale et la patronymie de façon particulière. C'est dans cette perspective de pouvoir combler ce vide que s'inscrit cette présente étude. Elle cherche à identifier certains patronymes sur l'espace Khassonké et ensuite expliquer leur origine. Après notre enquête sur le terrain, nous avons-nous même tiré beaucoup de conclusions par rapport aux nombreuses versions que nous entendions sur l'histoire du Khasso grâce à l'étymologie des différents patronymes. L'interview des participants a été utilisée pour collecter les informations dans les communes de Logo, Hawa Dembaya, Sero et Diamou. Les résultats révèlent que les patronymes au Khasso se basent d'une part sur la transmission familiale, c'est-à-dire l'appartenance à la lignée généalogique révélant la perpétuation de la filiation et d'autre part sur la variabilité géographique indiquant que les porteurs des patronymes appartiennent à une localité ou région donnée.*

**Mots clés :** Anthroponymie, Khassonké, Onomastique, Patronymie.

## **Introduction**

First, we present the Khassonke region. The Khassonke are in fact an ethnic group born of interbreeding between different peoples, but above all between Foula and Malinké. The Foula, Xaaso-Fulolu, have been assimilated into Manding culture and have lost everything that belonged to them, with the exception of their names and a few rare physical traits, such as the Fula jio, which can be found in certain individuals. The Peuls of Khasso are no longer Foula, but Khassonke, a new ethnic group of which they form the basic element. They formed the ruling aristocracy of most of the Khasso kingdoms: Dembaya, Diadieya, Guimbaya, Sero, Almameya, Niatiaga, Diakhitela and Sidibela. To the Fulani must be added the Malinke, who form the second constituent element of the Khassonke ethnic group, and who are no longer Malinke in language or culture. Firstly, there are those who have been totally integrated into the Foula-Khassonke terroirs and societies since the origins of the ethnic group. Families such as Kanté, Koite, Sissoko, Konate and Nomokho make up a significant proportion of the Khassonke ethnic group.

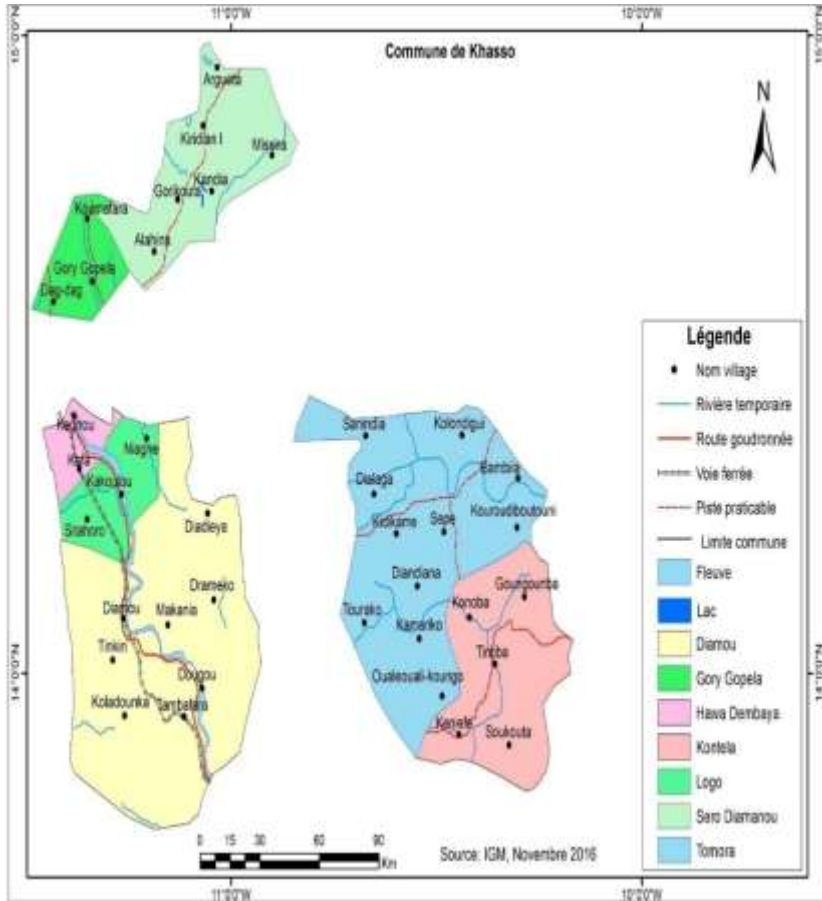
The second category is that of the original Malinke groups, organized into independent kingdoms and integrated into Khassonke culture. These are the Logo, Tomora and Khontela, who are in fact Khassonké by culture, but who refuse to be confused with the Khassonke. They have retained a clear awareness of their Malinke origins and therefore consider the Foula to be the only Khassonke. For their part, they have not lost the memory of their past and are proud to be called "Foula du Khasso". Thus, the new ethnic group does not seem sufficiently integrated. What's more, it lacks a clear sense of identity, and for historian Sekene Mody (1986), "Therein lies its tragedy: it was internally shaken by ethnic wars between Foula and Malinke, both of whom, in fact, abandoned their first ethnicity to merge into a new one that failed to integrate perfectly". (Sissoko, 1986, p.97).

*Khasso is a small country in terms of both geography and population. The role it has played in history is out of all proportion to its size. The Khasso, as an old Medina griot puts it, is a "name", meaning that it has acquired a reputation for greatness. Its history is the struggle of a small, divided people to survive in the face of its larger neighbors. Through it, the historian grasps the great upheavals that shook and shaped the peoples of Upper Senegal over two or three centuries of their evolution<sup>1</sup> (Sissoko 1986, p. 23).*

In short, the Khasso, by virtue of its geographical and human characteristics, is a land with no characteristic identity. It is at a crossroads, open to all influences that it can assimilate or reject. It is at the heart of the history of the peoples of Upper Senegal.

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<sup>1</sup> Translation mine: Khasso is a small land by its geographical extent and its population. The role, it has played in history is out of proportion to its dimension. Khasso, as an old griot from Medine said, is a "name", that is, it has acquired a great reputation for greatness. Its history is the effort of survival of a small divided people facing its big neighbors. Through it, the historian grasps the great tremors which shook, by modeling, the peoples of Upper Senegal during two or three centuries of their evolution.



The family name plays a key role in our identity. It links us to our origins, our culture and our language. It's with the surname that we go back in time, in search of our ancestors, to find our place in the world. The patronymic holds an important place in the identity of people in Africa, just as it does in Europe. In many West African cultures, the family name is also used to praise someone. In Pulaar, for example, the word patronymic is called yettoore and means to praise.

The stories of families and names are passed down mainly through oral tradition. In every family, children are told about the ties that bind them to other members of the family (family taken here in the broadest sense, going beyond the couple, encompassing many people and possibly including the entire lineage). These stories may also be documented, in the families of the literate, by genealogical accounts or chronicles, notably by scholars and especially by griots, who are the real historiographers. In Fouta Djallon, for example, the griots create sword-side narratives called "epic genealogies" focusing on the great dynastic figures of the theocracy.

In the oral tradition, the story of the ancestors is told during certain events or ceremonies: the enthronement of kings, weddings, circumcision, etc. It can also be told within the epic itself, which very often draws up the genealogy of the ancestors of the epic characters.

The aim of the present study is therefore both to (re)question, on the basis of empirically collected data, some of which telescope with those gathered by NDO Cissé (2012), the anthropological naming system specific to inhabitants in Mali. It will also be a question of determining whether the multi-ethnic composition of households and the socio-linguistic composition of the area are at the root of the configuration of family surnames and their exchanges between different ethnic groups cohabiting in Mali. The analysis, which is based on a three-pronged approach - onomastics, ethnolinguistics and sociology (sociology of language) - aims to highlight the transcultural and trans-ethnic nature of surnames. It also calls into question the status of the patronymic as a marker of ethnic identity upheld by authors such as Leroy (2006) and Manzano et al. (2006).

The theories we call upon for our analysis are of three kinds. Firstly, (African) onomastics, a branch of philology whose object is the study of proper nouns (human in this case) through their origin, formation and use. Long considered the poor

relation of linguistic studies due to its cross-disciplinary nature (Hervé Guillourel, 2012), onomastics as a science emerged in France in the 18th century. It was born of the desire to study the lexicological-semantic structures of proper nouns specific to the naming system of each people. Through the specific study of anthroponyms, it set itself the task of:

"To identify, within a society, the rules for attributing names, the principles according to which similar and different individuals are classified by naming them" (Bromberger, 1982).

## 1. Methodology

Khasso is made up of 10 communes. Unable to survey all 10 communes in order to have a representative sample, we combined the empirical and multi-stage systematic random methods. In the empirical method, we selected four communes, two with the largest number of villages, one with the smallest number of villages and one because of its very rapid contact with the school and white evangelists. The number of villages selected is shown in this table.

N°	Communes	Number of villages
1	Tomora	38
2	Khontela	28
3	Logo	19
4	Gopela	6
Total		91

This gives us a total of 91 villages, which constitute our sampling frame. In order to obtain a representative sample, we adopted the multi-stage systematic random method. To this end, we proceeded with:

- Random 1st-degree selection of  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the 91 villages that make up the four selected communes. Thus,  $91 \times \frac{1}{4} = 23$ , and the

number of villages retained is 23; thus, the family names in these villages have all been identified. With the help of our informants, we then looked for the different meanings of these surnames.

## 2. Results and discussion

### 2.1. Results

#### Identification and meaning of some family names

**Diallo** is one of the patronyms of the Fulani people, one of the most widespread ethnic groups in Africa. The four original Fulani surnames are said to be: Diallo, Ba (sometimes written Bah in Guinea), Barry, Sow. These names are identified with the elements of nature, the four cardinal points and the dress of cows. Diallo: fire, east, yellow; Ba: air, west, red; Barry: earth, north, white; Sow: water, south, black. It should be noted that alongside these mythical Fulani names, there are others such as Sy, Dem, Sall, Ka, Dia, Dieng, Ndiaye, Baldé and others.

**Diarra:** Clan name from West Africa (Mali in particular). As with all African names, it is difficult to give it a definite meaning. It's worth noting, however, that "Diarra" refers to the lion in a Bambara dialect."

**Coulibaly:** Essentially Malian, the name comes from a family that founded the Bambara kingdom of Ségou in the 17th century. A popular etymology has it meaning "without dugout" (kulunbari in Bambara). Variant: Koulibaly."

Originally spelled Tarawele, it's difficult to give an exact etymology to the Traoré surname, but there are several theories about its meaning. The first (and best-known) theory is that Tarawele means "go and call her". This theory makes sense

thanks to the scholar Solomana Kanté who, in one of his books, describes a warrior by the name of Touraman Koroba (Touraman the old), who was a great warrior before the advent of Sundiata, and who defended and protected the Manden.

**Camara:** once the most common Manding surname. It comes from the exemplary story of "**Mansa Biliba**" first king, the chairman of the kingdom of **Sinsany** (forerunner of Mendeng). It goes back many hundreds of years BC. It's a time that the king's contemporaries refer to as the abyss of chaos. Wars, desolation and terror ravaged the great civilizations. Legend has it that, unexpectedly, a courageous and thoughtful child prodigy came along who succeeded in pacifying and bringing under control an entire region without recourse to the army. It's a real masterstroke on the part of "**Bili ba**". He became king and earned the absolute respect of his people. His royal obligations made him **the "keeper of peace"** in the kingdom. Called "**Kâ m̄ara**" in Malinké, the effect of time means that they are now called **Camara** or **Kamara**.

### **Traoré**

They owe their patronymic to their "great-great" grandfather "**Touramanba 1st of the name**", who is different from the one who fought the Sosso kingdom alongside Soundiata son of Sogolon and who would be Touraman 6th of the name. Years ago, the **Mangend** kingdom formerly known as "**Krikoro**" came under attack. The kingdom (virtually powerless against the invaders) launched a campaign to plead with "Touraman 1st of the name" to come to the rescue of a cause that seemed already lost. This appeal is heard, and Touraman and his immaculate warriors come to liberate the kingdom by launching hostilities. This glory accompanies the valiant conqueror in the songs of Mandeng/manding, which tell the story in the following words: during the war "**He was called**", which in Malinke means "À



**tara welé**" for the war. Because of their geographical location and different dialects, we now call them "**Traoré**" or "**Trawoulé**".

### **Béréte**

Dependent on a crown prince called "**Mandjan**", less than ten years old, who loses his progenitor (the king) at an early age in a gangrenous kingdom full of conspiracies and upheavals. After his father's death, the crown fell to him by right of birth and royal blood. However, his corrupt and greedy uncles subtly misappropriated the crown in their favor on the pretext that the young prince Mandjan was "**immature, a minor**", which in Malinke means "**Bèdè tè**", and therefore incapable of making measured decisions for the stability of the kingdom.

To divert the attention of the prince's supporters, they maintained that they would return power to the prince when he was ready, i.e. when he grew up. The news spread and, to mock the deposed prince and dispossessor of his royal inheritance, the subjects (people) throughout the kingdom called him "**Mandjan Bèdè tè**", meaning "**Mandjan the immature**". The prince and his descendants never succeeded in regaining their throne, and they all became famous Manding marabouts. Because of their geographical location and different dialects, we now call them **Béréte** or **Berthé**...

**Konaté** comes from a pathetic history that goes back to a beautiful and charming princess named **Siyara Kéita**, but unfortunately neither her mercy, nor her kindness, nor her beauty could make her a mother when she married.

After several years of married life without conceiving, her co-wife and her entourage called her sterile, which in Malinké is called "**Koona**". The young princess, filled with grief and humiliation, went to her brothers to ask them to give her one of their countless children to adopt. Without hesitation, they

accepted the persecuted young princess's request. Back home, all those who had called her sterile were astonished to see a child with Princess **Siyara**. So, they say to each other: "So she's '**not sterile**'", which in Malinké is called "**Koona tè**".

Days were followed by weeks, then months, then years, and the adopted son established himself at the head of a large progeny, thus ensuring the lineage of the princess "**Siyara Koona tè**", who kept this patronymic. Today, the members of this line are called "**Konaté**", and they also answer to the names **Siyara** and **Kéita**.

### **Kourouma**

Unlike other Manding surnames, it's a more recent one, first uttered during the Empire's hegemony... He's a bit of a man, a small individual, who has made a name for himself in witchcraft, fetishes and the use of black magic in the Empire, to such an extent that no man or other gods of the time can pretend to harm him. The latter tried every conceivable means to harm him, but every time the man triumphed. In the end, no one with superhuman power can give him the slightest trouble, so they call him "**Kori ma**" in Malinke, which means "**tired of him**". Because of their geographical location and different dialects, we now call them "**Kourouma**" or "**Koroma**".

The story continues, this man settles in a hut and accepts the consultation of the subjects of the kingdom for the prediction of their future and other mysteries concerning them. A confidential meeting means "**doubouly**" in Malinké and the place "**dia ou ya**", so by analogy the place where the secret meeting is held is called "**doubou dia ou doubou ya**". This is why the **Kouroumas** are called "**Doubouya**" and vice versa.

**Touré** are originally men of the North, born among the **Maraka** (an ethnic group rare in Guinea, but numerous in Mali and Burkina-Faso), also warlords who ravage regions that oppose their supremacy. What they have in common is their robustness,

with large, remarkable feet like elephants. Thus, the people of the kingdom call them "**Tou-ré**", which means "**Elephants**" in their dialects. Mandjou also comes from there, but means harmless elephants "À mandjou" or "À djouman tè", which in Malinké means "Not wicked".

### **Sano/Sanogo**

The history of the bearers of this surname goes back to a man with a sense of bravery and honor by the name of "**Amadou le téméraire**". The story goes that since the dawn of time, there has been a pathetic ritual in Ouagadougou of giving a girl as an offering to the great seven-headed serpent of Ouagadougou as a sign of submission to the devil in order to receive happiness. This sad activity has persisted throughout the empire for centuries.

One day, it's Amadou's bride's turn to be offered as a sacrifice. Without a shadow of a doubt, the valiant Amadou goes into single combat with the evil, demonic python. After much hardship, he finally triumphs over the python and cuts off the creature's seven heads, after which he reclaims his beloved and flees with her. Happily, ever after. The inhabitants of the kingdom revolt against Amadou's action, fearing the wrath and reprisals of the demons. So, they chased Amadou's tribe away.

They left for the south of the empire. The Malinke call them "**Saa nogno**", meaning "**trace of the serpent**", **who have emigrated because of the serpent**. Because of their geographical location and different dialects, we now call them **Sano** or **Sanogo**.

**The Magassouba** is a much more recent surname than others. At the height of the empire, a time of fear, terror and tyranny, the king, adored by all the kingdom's subjects, had a sworn enemy. It was the people's favorite, a bold and daring man by the name of "Aly Maïga". As time goes by, the powerful king's

hatred of Aly Maïga grows. One day, the king ordered Maïga to be captured and put in chains. After several days, one early morning, Maïga's followers escaped with him and headed west, avoiding the king's guards and horsemen. Young Aly Maïga thus escaped the king's torments and his chains were broken in present-day Siguiri.

All those around Maïga called him the holder of supernatural powers. He was nicknamed "**Maïga le sorcier**" ("**Maïga the sorcerer**"), which in Malinké is called "**Maïga Souba**" ("**Maïga Souba**"). Today, they can be found throughout Guinea, mainly in Siguiri, under the names Magassouba, Diarrassouba or Maïga in Mali.

### **Condé /Koné**

This name is an ancient patronymic. In a remote village of Do (the home of Sogolon, mother of Soundiata Keita) lives an old witch who doesn't hesitate to take another person's life through black magic to protect her possessions and offspring. This old witch calls herself "**Kon**". To recognize her children and grandchildren, she places amulets around their necks and arms. So, as soon as a local see one of them, he or she cries out "**Kon dén**", son of **Kon** in Malinké. Geographical location and different dialectics thus transformed the name into "**Condé** or **Koné** or **Conté**."

### **Sylla**

The basis of this surname is different from all the others mentioned above. While the majority of Mandeng surnames stem from belligerence or the use of black magic or witchcraft, this one is linked to religion, in particular Islam. The **Sylla** are men of integrity and intelligence, gifted and endowed with knowledge, particularly in the reading of the Holy Koran. Sylla is that man with a melodious, captivating, moving and majestic voice; he is such a master at reading verses from the Koran that

people come from all walks of life to listen to or have listened to this sumptuous voice. As a result, he is practically the most sought-after and listened-to voice... He is nicknamed "**the man who presents during the night of destiny**", which in Malinke is called "**Roubasylla**". To this day, his descendants can be found in Guinea, Mali, Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal under the name of **Sylla**.

**The Diawara** come from the north, from a village once called **Dia**. As the young people of this village are fierce warriors, compared only to panthers (a powerful animal) which in Malinke is called **Wada** or **Wara**, they are called "the panthers of **Dia**", hence the name "**Dia wara**".

**Sissoko**: Khasso is made up of 14 provinces, including 11 Peul and 3 Malinke. The three Malinke provinces are all ruled by the Sissoko. Sissoko is composed of Su: horse and Soxo: to stab. Literally, to stab the horse. Putting it in its semantic context, the Susoxo, now Sissoko by deformation, are reputed to be extremely generous people, but also very jealous, capable even of stabbing their horse as his wife passes by out of jealousy.

**Dabo**: Also, the Malinke branch of the Khasso, they were the first inhabitants of the Logo kingdom. Da: mouth and Bo: to take out. Dabo means reserved, not very talkative and very courageous people who don't get involved in things that don't concern them.

**Nomoko**: Like the Dabo, the Nomoko are also the Malinke branch of the Khasso and were also among the first inhabitants. Non: to vanquish and Moxo: person, literally to vanquish a person. This morphological description implies that Nomoko, by deformation of Nomoxo, are warriors with the power to defeat any person.

**Dembélé and Diabaté:** Dan: limit and Bere: goodness, literally the limit of goodness. The Dembélé are therefore people of rare goodness. We need to go back to the story of the Do buffalo to understand how the Dembélé and Diabaté surnames came to be linked. In fact, they are two hunter brothers with the same father and mother who, in exchange for a large reward from the king, swore to kill the buffalo that was keeping the people of Do awake at night. It was the younger brother who killed the beast, while the older brother fled and climbed a tree. At the entrance to the village, little brother told big brother that he had the honor of announcing to the king that it was he who had killed the buffalo, so that all the reward would go to him. It was there that the big brother told the little brother I Dan bere (you're the limit of generosity) otherwise why let the honor go to me when you're the hero of the story, and the little brother replied by saying big brother, if you were a griot, I Je baxa te (no one could say no to you) because you know how to praise a person. According to my informants, this is how the surnames Danbere and Jebaxate came to be known as Dembélé and Diabaté.

**Kante:** it is customary in African villages to announce news through a town crier. In Sosso, the person announcing the news would add after the announcement "Ne kan nte, Somaoro Kan do" "the news is not mine, it's Soumaoro's". Ne Kan nte later became the family name Kanté.

**Fofana:** Literally "Men nou Folo fana ta" "those who first came into the world". According to Mr. Fofana, one of our informants in Almameya Sabouciré Laxafia, they are considered to be the world's first inhabitants.

**Doucouré:** The meaning is virtually impossible to establish. This name is mostly found in Soninke-speaking tribes, where it is borne by families belonging to the noble caste.

**Gueye and Sarr:** Wolof names also used by Toucouleurs. In Fouta-Toro (Peuhl region of northern Senegal), they are borne by the Torobe.

**Sacko:** This is a Soninke name. Oral tradition has it that the ancestor of the Sacko was one of the founders of Koumbi, capital of the ancient empire of Ghana, and led its armies. However, the Sacko in Khasso are griots, the first in Khasso, for it was they who carried the drum at the battle of Toumbin-Fara.

**Macalou:** A Soninke name found in Khasso. The Macalou are a branch of the Koita, themselves a branch of the Kakoro. Possible meaning, but not probable: good man, valiant.

The names found in the Khassonké geographical and historical area come from various origins, including Soninké, Malinké, Peul and Wolof. The Malinké and Peul origins are proof enough that Khassonké is the fruit of a long interbreeding between Peul (the original father) and Malinké (the original mother). The Soninke origin of Khasso family names could be explained by the fact that the area known today as Khasso was first populated by Soninke, since even Khassonke place names are mostly of Soninke origin. The Wolof came to Khasso through the trade between Medina and Saint Louis.

As far as social stratification is concerned, most Khasso surnames can be traced back to the various social classes present in the area.

## *2.2. Discussion*

At the end of the identification and explanation of some Khasso family names, we would like to make a few clarifications:

- Surnames on the Espace Khassonké are of Khassonké, Malinké, Soninké, Peul, Bamanan and even Wolof origin, but have been present in Khasso for several centuries.

- At the present stage of our research, names like Danioko, Macalou, Doucouré, Kanoute etc. remain indecipherable for us, despite their strong representation in Khasso.
- Unlike the first name, which used to be given to the Khasso on the 3rd day of the baby's birth in a very sober ceremony, the family name is known even before the newborn arrives in the world. He or she will bear the patronymic of the father's clan.
- Some family names are both masculine and feminine: Sissoko for men and Sakiliba for women, Dembele for men and Dansira for women, Konate for men and Soucko for women, Danioko for men and Damba for women, and so on.
- All Khassonké surnames are trans-social, meaning they belong to several social classes at once. We have Sissoko, Diallo, Kanoute etc. noble, captive and niamakala.

Among the Khasso, the first name is both an individual and a life-long name. In other words, it's the only name that won't change during an individual's lifetime, and the only one that's indispensable for designating him or her. As for the family name, originally a common ancestor, it gradually became the main name, the patronymic, and thus hereditary.

## **Conclusion**

This paper deals mainly with the origins of the family name, its formation and meaning, in the Khassonke area. From the most remote origins to the first occupants of the Khasso area, such is the historical framework of this research. Admittedly, this study is geographically limited, but it can at the same time provide a general overview of the origin and development of surnames in the Khasso area. The study reveals that the field of onomastics is relatively underdeveloped among the Khassonke, and Khasso anthroponymy to date has not been the subject of a comprehensive study. The specific field of anthroponymy



requires the use of a precise vocabulary. Our study has enabled us to distinguish between individual and collective names. Individual names include forenames and baptismal names; they are the names received on coming into the world, often double or triple afterwards. These names are life-long, lasting as long as the individual bears them, and dying with him or her. Family names in Khasso are collective names, and unlike first names, an individual acquires them automatically, simply by belonging to a group: they inherit them at birth, and pass them on to their descendants. Thus, Khasso surnames are based on family transmission, i.e. belonging to the genealogical lineage in order to perpetuate filiation.

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