Deproprial and associative plural in the Bambara of Segu region

A deproprial noun is a noun that is derived from a proper name $X$ and that has an asserted meaning ‘individual called $X$’ determining its reference (see Van de Velde & Ambouroue 2011). Although in most languages the distinction between a deproprial and a proper name use of a noun is not overtly marked on the noun itself, the two uses tend to have a somewhat different morphosyntax, related to the fact that unlike proper names, deproprial nouns are neither inherently definite nor inherently singular. Thus, only deproprial nouns can have a genuine additive plural, whereas proper names can only have an associative “plural”, viz. ‘$X$ and associates’ (cf. Daniel & Moravcsik 2005 on these different kinds of plurality). In languages with associative plural, the associative plural can be expressed by the same marker as the additive plural or by a different, usually dedicated, marker. Thus, in Standard Bambara, a form such as $\tilde{\text{Amadi}}-\tilde{u}$, where $-\tilde{u}$ is the regular additive plural marker, can mean either ‘several individuals called $\tilde{\text{Amadi}}$’ or ‘Amadi and associates’. In the Bambara of Segu region, a different marker $-\tilde{u}$ reserved for proper names and deproprial nouns derived from proper names is found in addition to $-\tilde{u}$. Depending on the variety, this marker $-\tilde{u}$ functions either (i) as associative plural marker with anthroponyms and as an additive plural marker with deproprial derivates of other kinds of proper names, or (ii) as a dedicated (additive) deproprial plural marker irrespective of the categorial presuppositional meaning (such as ‘person’, ‘place’, etc.) of the noun involved. Typologically, both types of the marker $-\tilde{u}$ appear to be rather unusual, if not unique, especially the dedicated deproprial plural marker. The paper provides a detailed description of the uses of the marker $-\tilde{u}$ and discusses the implications for delimiting the morphosyntactic category of proper names in Bambara. Finally, the paper offers a diachronic account of this typologically highly unusual pattern.

References: