

## **6 Summing up a life?**

### **Christianity and Islam.**

In the previous Lecture I discussed traditional religion and how it changed in the course of the twentieth century in ways that have the effect of reducing the centrality of the institution of the chief. In this final Lecture I begin by discussing the influence of Islam and Christianity and how they have been incorporated into Mambila religious practices, especially upon some of the older traditional practices which were mentioned yesterday.

Both the Religions of the Book have been helped in their acceptance by a basic monotheism in Mambila religion in which the Semitic 'god' has been identified with the Mambila *Càŋ*. The only question that remains granted that identity is how to deal with and intercede with God. Granted considerable uncertainty about how to do this, the general attitude has been 'the more the better'. As I shall explain, this attitude has recently shown signs of changing as people have had more exposure to different forms of the religions, and in response to those professing more radical or purer forms of the religions there are definite signs of the emergence of what I hesitate to call 'fundamentalism', but certainly can label 'religious purity'.

### **Islam**

Islam, because of its association with the FulBe from Banyo and the North has had a less easy acceptance into the village in much of the twentieth century. This is changing fast, both as the period of slaving becomes more distant and under the influence of migration from Nigerian Mambila down onto the Tikar plain which has been a feature of the last twenty years. The population of the village has increased dramatically and since most of the migrants are Moslem so the proportion of Moslems

in the village has increased. Until this wave of migration started there were two factors leading to conversion to Islam. One was pressure from the top. I have already discussed the pressure from Banyo to ensure that the Chiefs converted. Through such conversions most (many?) of their wives and children followed suit. (However, I note that at an earlier period, Konaka took an extremely calculating view of the different religions available he distributed his thirty two children between Protestant Christianity, Catholic Christianity (which some people in Cameroon will describe as different religions) and Islam.) The other factor is one of the side effects of local slavery which I have already described from the point of view of the village in general, and from a perspective of the middle of the century when the struggle for national independence had a more immediate local interpretation as independence from Banyo. Yet, for some of those sent as 'tribute' were well looked after and served as servants to the Lamido. Especially once they had converted to Islam they sometimes took on roles of responsibility, which especially for those who did not 'Fulbe-ise' to the extent of denying their ethnic origins, enabled them to act as intermediaries in the dealing of Banyo with their natal villages. A recent example of this, although I should stress that, being a more recent example, it did not start with slaving - was Yokomi Oumarou, a member of the Chief's family who for many years worked as one of the secretaries to the Lamido's court in Banyo. On retirement, he returned to Somié where he acted as an adviser and secretary to the Chief and a prominent Moslem until his death in 2004. For those from the village with ambitions to power and influence in the world, one of the consequences of being incorporated in Adamaoua province is that they naturally look to the north, to Banyo and beyond it to Ngaoundéré, the provincial capital. The fellowship of co-religionists has been and continues to be an important first step for those from the Tikar Plain in such cities where they are prone to be disparaged as non-Fulbe agriculturalists (agriculture being the stereotypic occupation of slaves whereas, according to the stereotypes, Fulbe are cattle keepers). We shall return to this theme later when discussing the case of Chief Mogo Michel.

## Christianity

This has been a later arrival than Islam but without the association with FulBe hegemony it has been more enthusiastically embraced. For the present I'll say no more but try and discuss it through the lens of Diko's account and subsequent actions.

This is Diko's account of the arrival of Christian missionaries:

The first Missionaries were Catholics. When they came everyone all went to see them, to hear what they said. The wives of chief and the Gəmgbe all went, Diko in the lead. First they just prayed and prayed and this was fine. Then something happened that spoiled it you see at that point we didn't understand properly. They said we should pull the *kwə lə* {medicinal taro (*aracae caladium sp.*)} out of the ground from outside the houses. That was at the beginning. Chief Konaka said 'Will people not die anymore?' 'Should we destroy even the taro I have planted? Not my taro.' And he said that if the children want to go to school they can go to school but he was having nothing of it. Then later when the Protestant mission arrived we went there. But they said the same thing: that we should abandon the magic. Yes, it started like that but they wanted us to destroy the anti-witch medicine the medicinal taro- which you plant outside your house.

Sondue responded to Diko saying 'yes his father had that plant and one morning when they got up there was blood on it. Sondue's father said it had blocked a witch and that's where the blood came from. Although the missionaries said it was bad to plant such things, rather it was bad not to plant such things. Many people up {in Nigeria} don't know about Christianity or Islam just follow tradition and they live longer than us!' {Note that Sondue is a devoted Catholic and an erstwhile catechist}. They then moved on to talking about the importance of respecting taboos {*julu* see above} and how divination should be used for farming decisions and when to start the harvest.

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In a separate interview with me the Chief's elder brother, Gamia, gave a somewhat different account. According to him, when the first missionaries arrived the villagers understood the Christian message to be that no one would die anymore. This makes it sound like the witchcraft eradication cults that swept through the region on a regular basis (one of which, 'Makka' in 1938 has been relatively well documented). So everyone went to church until the first subsequent death whereupon they all left feeling they had been misled. Gamia is an interesting witness on this both by virtue of his age, being the last surviving son of Chief Menandi (he was born in the early 1920s and died in 2002), but more because of his position in the Protestant church where he was a senior figure in the regional church. As a consequence of this he had publicly and explicitly ruled himself out of the chiefship on account of his religious convictions.

From these early beginnings the situation developed into one which is familiar from many reports in Sub-Saharan Africa, one of accommodation and co-existence. As the memories and association between the Fulbe and their religious affiliation began to fade, after the Second World War appreciable numbers of Mambila began to convert to Islam as well as so by the nineteen eighties I found the village with some two-thirds affiliated to versions of Christianity and one third to Islam. Very, very few people took the view that adoption of a religion implied that other practices were problematic. Typically it was recognised that some were, but others not at all. So some, in their terms relatively strict, Christians wanted nothing to do with the *suàgà* masquerades in life or death to the extent of making death bed requests not to have a traditional funeral at which the masquerades would appear. But, as was mentioned above, and as I will shortly discuss, *suàgà* is a clear and visible symbol of 'traditional

religion' in a way that divination is not. As we have just seen in the recorded conversation, at the point where Diko and Sondue are discussing the arrival of the first Christian missionaries they moved seamlessly from the arrival of the Christian missionaries to a discussion of how divination was far more widely used than it is now. The clear sense of the talk is that 'we are the worse for this loss'. This is all the more striking when you reflect that Diko was for most of her life a much respected member of the Protestant church and Sondue an enthusiastic member of the Catholic church, having served as a catechist in his youth.<sup>1</sup> *Suàgà* is one thing, the most prominent example of traditional religion, other practices are seen as being rather different, and are not seen as conflicting with Christianity or Islam. These include the use of divination as well as the use of 'medicinal' plants used to ward off witchcraft. As Sondue said, these are good things which everyone should do, a sentiment which is widely shared.

Yet by the end of the century there were signs that this sort of co-existence might be coming to an end. There are signs, not yet conclusive, that more people from both the Moslem and Christian communities in Somié are taking a stricter line on the implications of their religious affiliation.

I will consider two instances of the development of religious purism in Somié. 1) The conversion of Mogo Michel to Islam and the burning of the jere *suàgà* c. 1975.

Chief Mogo Michel was a Catholic Catechiste, he stopped this when he became Chief. Subsequent to this he converted to Islam. His first wife who converted with

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<sup>1</sup> His is the voice on first and only Mambila 78rpm record: a translation of two passages of the bible released in 1963 Michel Sondue, *Mambila 2580 3A and 3B*:

him (in fact she was originally a Protestant but had become Catholic when she married Mogo. She followed him again when he became a Moslem). Her account of his conversion was he converted quite soon after becoming Chief because when he went to Banyo and Ngaoundéré for meetings, the other people there, [who were Moslems] wouldn't eat with him because he wasn't Moslem. So he converted for convenience as well as, I suspect, for other factors already mentioned: the Lamido of Banyo rewarded Chiefs who converted (apocryphally the nineteenth century Chief of Somie Cokmo (lit. clothing mine) is said to have gained that name after being given a *gandura* gown by the Lamido of Banyo).

Later, he came under the influence of Mallam Banjie a Mambila Islamic preacher who had spent years in Banyo. Encouraged by Banjie, Mogo undertook a major gesture: he burnt the *suàgà* enclosure, the *jere suàgà* as a sign that he was not a pagan any more. (I have already mentioned the taboos surrounding the work on the *suàgà* enclosure and discussed the role of the masquerades for the meaning of *suàgà* and the Chief). A local model for actions such as this is Banyo where the FulBe are said to have built their central Mosque on the site of the Vute (the local ethnic group) masquerade enclosure. The burning of the enclosure was planned as a deliberate act, and Muslims came from the predominantly Moslem village Ribao to help the burning - while everyone else was in the fields. Mogo's gesture angered the elders, and they never really patched it up the chiefship was radically weakened in the remaining years of his tenure. The *suàgà* enclosure was rebuilt but on the other side of the chief's palace, on a different location from the one 'defiled' (as the Elders saw it) by Mogo under Banjie's instigation. As a result of this Banjie had to leave the village; he lived out his remaining years in exile and he died in the capital city, Yaoundé. But

Mallam Banjie was Diko's son-in-law. He was married to Beηgam, one of the daughters that Diko left out of the count when telling her genealogy to Sondue, as we saw in previous Lectures.

This was an early gesture and one that failed. The *suàgà* enclosure was rebuilt. Mogo's successor, Degah, was a devout Moslem but he also participated in the traditional rituals including the *suàgà* masquerades.

2) More moves towards religious purity have been seen in the organisation of funerals over the last fifteen years. I have witnessed several arguments about the organisation of funerals. These have culminated in a series of arguments which I did not witness about how Chief Degah himself should have been buried. These arguments are not as dramatic as the celebrated Kenyan case of 'Burying SM' (Cohen and Odhiambo 1992) in which natal family and wife clashed about where the body of the prominent Kenyan lawyer should be buried according to Christian tradition in a consecrated graveyard in Nairobi or, following Luo tradition, in his natal compound, in the same location as his umbilical cord was buried. But just as that case exemplified and brought into the open many tensions about the relationship of tradition and modernity in Kenya so too do arguments about how senior Mambila should be buried, bring into the open the tensions between Mambila traditional religion (and the *suàgà* masquerades in particular) and the religions of the book, Christianity in the cases I have witnessed, Islam in the case of the late chief Degah.

It is easy to elicit information about funerals in Mambila. Many people will sit and give you accounts of how funerals are organised. If you ask you may be told about how they used to be. This fluency, befits a society in which death is commonplace, one in which adults seem to be dying more often as the AIDS pandemic begins to take its toll, and one in which attendance at funerals is a social obligation widely followed:

in the days following a death large numbers of people gather to sit with those immediately bereaved.

But the accounts are incomplete, and in particular, they do not reveal the tensions between traditional funerary ritual and Christian rites which local practice reveals. That the tension is appreciated and explicitly discussed is demonstrated by the arguments that sometimes breakout either immediately following the death when the funeral is being planned or even, in some cases, during the funeral proceedings.

Funeral rites can be summarized as follows: burial takes place as soon as possible, although no preparations are made until after death. Shaft and chamber graves have been replaced by a grave style borrowed from the FulBe earlier this century. A wide shaft has a small body size trench cut in the bottom. The body is placed in this wrapped in a cloth. Both sexes are placed facing West with the right hand held up. A raffia-pith mat is placed over the body then the trench is roofed in with a screen of poles to prevent the earth directly touching the body. When filling the grave the soil is replaced so that the darker soil from the surface is put in first. Red sub-surface soil is thus left at the top. This serves to mark the location of the grave.

Those who touch the body must be treated afterwards to prevent arthritis: they hold their hands over a fire then shake all their limbs as if 'shaking off' something. Burial is performed by men, with women attending. It is now usually accompanied by a Moslem or Christian prayer. In the past women used not to accompany the body to the grave side. Women were not supposed to see the grave until it had been filled. I could elicit no explanation for this.

Meanwhile people gather at the home of the deceased and sit there for some days. Food is brought so that no one in the compound needs to cook and money is collected to pay for beer and cola which is offered to the guests. Each guest on leaving pays their respects to the most senior of the bereaved and may discreetly hand them some money.

A feast in which food is given to all comers is held on the third day after death. If death occurs in the evening there is often some debate as to when to start counting; practical considerations may sway the issue - for example so that the feast day falls on a Sunday, allowing more people to attend.

The house of the deceased is swept with the *fuo yə* plant (one of the *Labiatae* (?*plectranthus sp.*), the smell of which is said to drive the spirit (*Càŋ*) of the deceased out into the bush. Close relatives (and affines) are also treated 'to prevent them dreaming of the deceased.'

A second feast is held forty days afterwards, and this is a more elaborate affair since there has been more time to plan it. The second feast often does not occur exactly when it should: it is very likely to be held on the Sunday after forty days have elapsed, and is sometimes postponed until sufficient funds are available. This is very likely to coincide with the 'summer holidays' when 'rich' city dwellers return to the village for their holidays and may contribute for the funeral feast of their siblings. However, these feasts do not compare in any way with the 'cry-die' complex of the Grassfields (described, for example, by Brain and Pollock 1971 et. al.).

The feasts are notable for the absence of any ritual other than the commensality implicit in their existence, although either Christian or Muslim prayers are now included before the meal.

Quite separate from the feasts is the dancing of *suàgà* for senior people. This occurs on the night following the death - for a death in the evening it happens the night after. Men's *suàgà* is danced for a deceased male, women's *suàgà* for a female just as during the masquerades. I suspect that the death of a very senior man might occasion an appearance by the masquerade itself but I have no data on the point. The dancing occurs as a further elaboration of the visiting already described. No express mention of the deceased is made, and there is no difference (except in scale and hence dress of the dancers) between these funeral dances and the dances which accompany the masquerade.

Rehfishch has photographs from Warwar in 1953 of funeral dances wherein a collection of bells and other objects are dragged along the ground. Although there are currently none in Somié they are known there and exist in neighbouring villages where they are produced at major oaths<sup>2</sup> and during the masquerade.

No reasons were given for the practice, nor were criteria explicitly stated for the decision whether a certain person warranted the dancing of *suàgà*, apart from generalizations such as ‘if they are very old’ or if a Notable. It seems that an old and respected person with prominent children resident in the village will have *suàgà* danced for them. Unless that is either they or their children are devout Christians. This has been the cause of the quarrels.

In the past funerary rites were certainly more complex. Both Rehfishch and Schneider, who were in Warwar in the early 1950’s, report funerals of senior men at which the body was displayed, tied upright to a ladder, or to stakes placed in the ground (Schneider 1992). Death was announced by a special drum beat (**jùàr jùm**) on the **jùàr mbə** drum. No burial took place until close kin had seen the body, to verify that it was in fact dead. Senior participants in *suàgà* were treated by their peers before burial. Men did this beside the grave and women in the house before the corpse was carried out for burial. Some such rites are still performed. The ladder on which the corpse was carried was left to rot on top of the grave. Today, if the body was carried on a raffia bed it will be dismantled and left on top of the grave. Consider some examples of how funeral arrangements work out in practice. First, when Mbiyuo Bernard the husband of a titled Gənmgbə, died in April 2000 men’s *suàgà* was danced at his funeral despite him, unusually, not having been a full initiate of the masquerade group. But he was senior, husband of a Gənmgbə and the father of twins which gives him an extra honorific title. Second, when a devout Christian, Huombon Madeleine, died in autumn of 2000 they did not do any form of the *suàgà* dance

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<sup>2</sup> For example, at the *suàgà*-oath taken at Sonkolong in November 1986 to establish peace between Somié and Sonkolong.

which would have been appropriate for a woman of her age and stature in the village- she had asked for just Christian prayer and as a devout Christian (senior in *Femmes Pour Christe*) her wishes were respected. I note that when her husband died in November 2001 *suàgà* was danced for him before the funeral feast held three days after the death but not at the later forty days feast. But he had respected her wishes and that funeral proceeded without argument. Other instances have not been so easy. In one case where I was present the funeral effectively split into two the Christians saying their prayers, singing their songs (teetotal since these were Lutherans) and next door the traditionalists, the women singing the songs of women's *suàgà* and everyone drinking beer.

In another sound recording made on 26<sup>th</sup> July 1997 (which I have yet to fully analyze) the evening that a death was announced a group of kin and church members had a passionate discussion about whether Christian prayer was compatible with the singing of *suàgà* songs. The active Christians were threatening not to allow the choir to attend if *suàgà* songs were sung, let alone if the special dance took place.

### **The skull cult of the chief**

These issues came to the fore in the disputes that surrounded the burial of the late chief Degah François in April 2002. I should stress that I was not present for these events and there is still a lot of tension which inhibits their discussion, so the following must be seen as a tentative and provisional first report.

A chief is not an ordinary person. One of the ways this manifests itself is that there is a skull cult of the Chief (almost certainly a borrowing from the Tikar since there is no documentation of this occurring among Nigerian Mambila). Generally, however, there is no skull-cult<sup>3</sup> and, readers will recall from the previous Lecture that

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<sup>3</sup> Some old men say that in the distant past men who participated in the **Lom** rites (now long defunct) had their skulls removed and placed in trees.

Mambila do not make connections between skulls, stones, pots and rain as has been reported in the North of Cameroon.

First let me give the formal and abstract account I have received of how the death of a chief 'should' be managed. The skulls of Chiefs are removed and given a secondary 'burial' in the 'Chiefs' skull house' behind the Palace. Only sister's sons of the Chief may enter this building. **Ngwun**<sup>4</sup> and men's *suàgà* are danced following the death of a chief. Chiefs are buried sitting upright in a circular shaft grave. Approximately a month after the burial the head is removed and washed. The skull is placed in a small four-handled Mambila basket (**sɔgɔ bà**) in the skull house (**gua fə**) to the West of the Palace.

I have not been allowed access to the skull-house, nor were the sister's sons forthcoming about the rites performed there. In particular, the relationship between the current Chief and the skulls of his predecessors remains unclear. The rites described to me did not involve the Chief himself. Annually, the heads are taken from their baskets and 'washed', being sprayed with palm wine by the sister's sons. The day on which this takes place is made 'sóo': it is forbidden to break the soil and to cut elephant grass, so no farmwork is undertaken.

In the past non-Mambila immigrants to the village acted as guards and had permanent sleeping-quarters in the skull house, but this practice ceased in the 1950's. The heads are said to shake in their baskets when a Notable is going to die, and the guards were supposed to report this to the Chief so that he could initiate divination in order to discover whose death was portended, and whether any action could be taken to avert it.

The late Chief Degah did both *suàgà* and was a practising Moslem. When he died this led to trouble. It seems that he had told different people on different

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<sup>4</sup> This is the dance performed at the installation of Chiefs and thereafter every two years soon after the New Year.

occasions that he wanted Islamic rites and traditional burial. The most senior Moslem in the village is not Mambila but a 'fonctionnaire' (an employee of the state, heading the village agricultural development post). As I understand it he was pressing for a swift burial following Islamic practice. The first clash concerned whether they would wait before the burial until Degah's adult sons (one of whom is a soldier) could view the corpse (see above). The second was whether he would be buried according to Islamic practise or following the special 'royal tradition' in such a way as to enable the removal of the skull. My understanding is that having waited for the sons to return he was buried according to Islamic custom. There are rumours current in the village that he may have been secretly reburied according to 'custom'. Whether or not this is the case, in 2003 the village seniors were cross with Moslems. I heard it being said that they should not be allowed into the palace, or even according to some, to become Chief at all. This is an extreme and very prominent case and I must emphasise how uncertain my information is. As a Christian and traditionalist Diko is clear on this subject: he should be buried according to tradition and his skull should be removed...

### **Summing up a life? Last words. Several farewells**

For the present we shall leave the topic of religion there. To conclude I shall briefly consider the more recent past and the future.

### **Going to the well**

As was mentioned above, when I first lived in Somié I lived in the house of Huomdie Marguerite, one of Diko's daughters. This was behind Diko's house but only about twenty yards away. Between us was a well. The bucket and rope for the well was kept in Diko's house so I became a regular visitor, popping in to borrow the bucket to draw water.

Why was the bucket not tied onto the well mouth? I can think of two reasons. One is to control the use of the well - especially by February or March, at the end of the dry season, the water level become low and the water was muddy by the end of the day. By keeping the bucket in the house she could stop strangers and children drawing water and muddying the water. The second reason would be the fear of theft. Petty theft of items such as buckets does happen in the village, and although it would be identifiable through the pattern of patched repairs, a bucket left out overnight is just to sort of thing that gets stolen in Somié. Villagers are prone to attributing this to strangers - especially in the dry season when transhumant Fulbe are around the village. They serve as immediately available scapegoats for any infraction that occurs. Some villagers would also blame immigrants - these *are* Mambila but from the Nigerian villages on the Mambila plateau such as Kabri where Diko's sister lived. Again blaming immigrants is a common reflex rather than admitting that theft could originate from among those born in the village. I have no good data about the rates of petty crime in the village. The most reliable index of a rise is for a specific type of theft: from granaries. In 1985 when I started work in Somié most people stored grain in granaries in their fields. Now these have been abandoned and maize is stored in the village either in new granaries beside houses or in attics. The reasons given for this change is simply that there were too many thefts from granaries in the fields...

Diko's well is still in use but as I write this a project to pipe filtered water from a source in the hills 4.5km behind the village is in its final phase. When completed I hope that this will ameliorate life in the village both by reducing the labour demands on women and children and, more directly, by reducing the infant mortality associated through water-born disease. Diko was lucky to have four of her seven children survive into adulthood. Although as first wife of the chief she was relatively privileged, the stress must be on the word *relatively*. Few of Konaka's

children still survive, and as if to demonstrate how fickle life can be, still fewer of Chief Møgø survive, (although he had fewer wives and fewer children), but he lived far more recently than Konaka. Møgø dieing in 1973, Konaka in 1948 xxx 1949. There is now a far greater range of wealth and privilege than fifty years ago. Money buys not just better housing but access to medicines and hospitals, none of which were available to Diko when she was raising her children. This is all the more significant now as some of the more effective treatments for AIDs have become affordable to, at least some of, those in the village.

### **Patterns of Association**

The comments I have made about the increasing importance of Islam and Christianity have left out, until now, anything about their social consequences. These are particularly important for women, since both the Christian churches, the Catholics and the Protestant (Lutherans) have large and active women's groups who work together, for example, farming fields whose crops are be used for the church. Sometimes grain from these fields is given to members of the Church incapacitated through illness. The important thing is that they represent a forum for women to act together independent of the chief and the traditional religion. In Diko's youth the only time women acted communally were in work parties in the chiefs fields or during the biennial women's masquerade, *suàgà b`ø veh*. Like the rotating credit societies, (the so-called *dashis* or *djanggis*, as originally described by Shirley Ardener) they provide arenas of some economic importance in which women organise and act for themselves. The only other place where this happens is in the organisation of the women's wing of the ruling party the CPDM<sup>5</sup> which is the main party supported by the population of

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<sup>5</sup> Rassemblement démocratique du peuple camerounaise (RDPC) - Cameroon Peoples

Somié. But although the villagers have mainly voted CPDM in the past, the women's party group is not very active. It exists mainly in order that it can be seen to exist when visiting dignitaries from the CPDM party visit the village.

There are other more significant changes in the patterns of gender relations taking place. More women are completing their schooling and although there are far fewer jobs in the cities than there were twenty years ago those who have been sent off to secondary school in Bankim or beyond often choose to stay there. This raises long term questions about the future of the village which parallel changes throughout Africa. But as several people have realised in recent years some of whom have returned from the cities - farming in the village, hard though it may be, does have advantages over fighting to earn a wage in the city. The women who return, and at present this is most of them, bring ideas from the cities back with them. The increased incidence of girls completing school is meaning that their age at marriage is increasing. My impression is that marriages are becoming less stable, partly, I suspect through another combination of increased expectations which living in the city can exacerbate. Having seen the mansions built by cabinet ministers everyone wants to live in them. Marital instability is also increased by another unforeseen consequence of schooling away from the village: partners to a marriage may not know each other as well as they would have done when Diko was young. Since one or other of the parties may have spent significant periods away from the village in different cities, they may meet each other more as strangers than would have been the case in the past. These factors contribute to an increasing turnover of marriage partners until a stable match is found (this is to return us to a topic pioneered in the nineteen sixties by Jack and Esther Goody who examined the factors contributing to the frequencies

of divorce among different groups in Ghana (1967) see also Epstein and Kaler xxx for a corrective warning from Malawi that things may always have been so, all that has changed are the reasons being given for marital instability).

Having said something about recent changes in patterns of association and in marriage I should say something about the power of the Chief. The hegemony of the state has increased over the forty years since independence. As various groups in the Northwest Province found to their cost, voting for the opposition parties can lead to government agents choosing to deploy development resources elsewhere. Crudely, infrastructural investment follows votes for the ruling party. And the position of the chief is increasingly weakened by the role of the state institutions. The nearest police post was seventy kilometres away in 1985 but since 1998 xxx it has been a mere fifteen (in Atta), and policemen visit regularly on market day. This circumscribes the freedom of the chief to arbitrate and resolve disputes by making it easier for a disgruntled party unhappy at the suggested resolution to go to the police instead (a risky business it must be said, but at least one which people threaten to do during arguments at the Chief's court. Even if this is pure rhetoric it is a new trope and one that points to a further reduction of the Chief's power). Similarly, increased rates of immigration challenge the traditional patterns of authority. In neighbouring villages there has been considerable immigration by people of different ethnic origins. This has not yet occurred in Somié. The neighbouring Mambila villages have seen the authority of the chief challenged not so much directly as indirectly. Those from other ethnic groups do not subscribe to Mambila traditional religion, and although Mambila elders say that *suàgà* can afflict everyone this may not seem obvious to a migrant farm worker of non-Mambila ethnicity. But as we saw in the previous Lecture although the chief is no longer *central* to the workings of the traditional religious system he is still closely involved with it. Once the power of *suàgà* is put in question

then so too is the authority of the Chief. The government authorities support the chiefs but at a clear cost of their autonomy.

### **Requiems**

This book was prepared in a village subdued by a series of deaths of senior men: that of Chief Degah in April 2002, followed in September by the death of his elder brother Gamgbe Lucas, and then, on Christmas Eve 2002, Pasteur Sitene Emmanuel. It was finished in Somié during December 2004 a few months after Diko's death. In this emotional climate reflection and commiseration are appropriate, especially as the AIDS pandemic is really only now beginning to affect the population of Somié.

Enough people have now died for it to be increasingly hard to deny the reality of the disease, as was the case for most of the Nineteen Nineties. But sexual mores are such (see the contrasts with !Nisa above in Lectures 1 and 2) that frank talk about sex and education about strategies to reduce the frequency of infection and transmission are still problematic.

### ***Dealing with AIDS***

So, sadly, the strong likelihood is that rates of infant mortality are set to rise again even when offset by the water project mentioned earlier. There are no reliable figures for the prevalence of HIV infection on the Tikar Plain: estimates by medical practitioners vary from 10 to 40% of the key at-risk population (in the age range 15-40 years). Xxx check press. If this is correct then over the next decade a large number of young adults is likely to die and many babies will be born HIV positive.

There are some signs of increasing awareness among the population, certainly condom use has increased from near zero in the late 1980s, but that alone is certainly

not enough. How the village can respond as a community is one of the major challenges facing the new chief who was installed in 2003. Support from the state and the churches has been low, and is likely to remain so.

Of course AIDS kills not just the very young and there are many dieing of other diseases too. Two years ago Diko helped nurse one of her adult daughters as she died of tuberculosis (Benjamin d.c. May 2002), surely one of the saddest tasks for a parent. This happened long after the tapes with Sondue had been recorded, and it is too raw a wound for me to be able to discuss with her. But sadly this too is common, and the combination of AIDs and new strains of tuberculosis means that it is likely to remain so. Being an adult means dealing with death, of children, siblings, spouses and one's own.

Like most people Mambila do not enjoy talking about their own death and few are minded to pursue the philosophical contemplation of mortality in the abstract, it is too concrete a subject. When some one dies everyone gathers at the house for three days, when a first funerary feast is held. Thereafter people start returning to the fields and kin stay on (the closer the connection the longer they stay) sitting in melancholy contemplation of the deceased and death, eased by cola nuts and beer. What gets said at such gatherings reflects everyone's familiarity with death. People know that life is uncertain and many take Islam or Christianity to offer solace in better ways than that provided by the traditional religion. This gave little prominence to ancestors (compared to other groups in the region) but, like religions concerned with ancestors it gave little solace for the parents of those who died young. The comments made by people at funerals imply a stark recognition of the uncertainty of life; and we who are left must continue in that knowledge. What people say is that God is unknowable, unguessable, and these events are caused by God. I note that sometimes these are

pious hopes in a different sense, since some deaths are believed not to be caused by God as much as by human agents acting through witchcraft. This is never discussed explicitly at funerals since by then it is too late. I am sure, however, that some of the bereaved find solace in the idea that their ritual actions (particularly making a *suàgà* oath) will eventually kill the person they hold responsible for a death.

### **Role of the old tradition under threat**

Across the world the old bemoan the young, they bemoan change and that the young don't listen to them as they should. These are stereotypes that Diko would agree with. I suspect her grandmother would have too. This is not a new problem, although it may be that the scale of changes moves us from quantitative to qualitative change, and demography itself may affect the issue: if more people survive into old age they may be seen as a problem not as scarce repositories of knowledge. The changes that Diko has seen make her an important witness of change on a scale much greater than that experienced by either her grandmother or her grandchildren. She is therefore placed to mediate Mambila tradition and history to the future generations and the new Chief of the village. The challenge for the new Chief and the population of the village is to decide how to use what she says. By virtue of her age and her social seniority Diko has become recognised as a custodian of tradition, one of those instrumental in defining what it is to be Mambila. As they enter the twenty first century, like many in Cameroon, the village population are having to deal with history and tradition in ways very different to those in which they operate early in the twentieth century. Being Mambila is a contemporary challenge, not a historical problem ('What was it to be Mambila?'), but as a question as to how to live a modern life.

Having mentioned some of the problems facing the population in the years to come I do not want to end on a negative note. There is much about the population of

Somié to cherish and cherish it I do. There is much about Diko to like and enjoy: she has a sense of humour, hard though it is to capture in words, isolated from the conversations which provoked the laughter. But the tapes are full of laughter, some of the stories of the past, were hard to bear at the time, but now elicit laughter the story of her argument with her husband being a case in point. (And often, all too often I have caused merriment in her house by my linguistic and social mistakes but that perhaps is neither here nor there.)

When I visited Somié in January 2003 having delivered the Evans Pritchard Lectures I talked to Diko about the book I was writing about her life, and as she had said previously on the tape, she liked the idea of her thoughts and memories being available to future generations. She welcomed the project, with the caveat that I seemed to have been taking my time; that I should just get on with it. For more than a decade now when I leave the village I say goodbye fearful that I will not see her again. As I prepare to return to the village to greet the new chief Ndi Adam and to see if the water project has (at last) been completed I look forward with trepidation to the answer to my first question: *Diko né tén wa?* Is Diko still with us? Irrespective of the answer (since sadly one day it will be *Tam suú* ‘no longer’) this book stands as my contribution to her memory.

In the first Lecture I sketched some of the orienting stereotypes available to an anthropologist concerned with life-history. I considered ghost writing, hagiography and biography and evoked the possibility of writing something which amounted to an anthropological silhouette. In the Lectures that followed I have at times tried to give voice to Diko’s telling, recounting her account of her quarrel with her husband or how first harvest rites should be practiced. In these sections I have come close to the role of ghost writer. In other parts, especially when talking about Diko’s son Ndi whose

short lived Chiefship ended in 1953 with his death in a car crash I have felt the pressures of hagiography. He died before he had a chance to fail in his attempt to shift administrative responsibility from Banyo to Foumban, so his memory can be cherished in the glow of 'what might have been'. Hagiography concentrates on success and potential, ignores or deprecates the messiness of life as it gets lived. Repeatedly when trying to summarize the role and actions of Diko herself I have assumed the mantle of biographer, my third stereotype, explaining, considering and analyzing her spoken words. Since these were conversations not monologues there were more people than just Diko involved, and I have evoked the role of my friend, assistant and collaborator, Sondue Michel, without whom little of this material could have been collected. The conversations have led me to ask questions of the wider picture, and to consider the changes that have faced Mambila over the last hundred years. So, when thinking about the population of Somié I think of them framed and variously put into perspective by the life of Diko Madeleine. It is in this sense that I hope that what I have done is present you with an anthropological silhouette.





Epilogue December 2004

I first heard the news in Yaoundé. Apparently an email was sent but it never arrived. Diko is dead. Not a surprise but still a blow particularly in the way of its happening. In one week three people died: Ndah (Jonas Koum her grandson, Louise, her grand-niece and Diko herself). Ndah first and hearing this, since he helped Diko so much on a day to day basis, Diko then died, Louise last, but she had been very ill for a long time, with all the classic symptoms of AIDS, not that there was a firm diagnosis (that anyone publicly admits to and, of course, not that there will have been any autopsy). I wonder what happened to Ndah who was healthy when I last saw him c 6 months ago?

Huomdie says it was not like that. First Lousie died, then Jonas and third was Diko. Why does it feel so important to know the sequence? So you know who was in the mind of whom on their death bed? Although illness makes us all selfish, the self absorption of pain... So when Huomdie says that Diko sent her greetings to me I dare not ask when she said this, even if Huomdie is just saying this to make me feel good or to stop crying (it has the reverse effect) then I appreciate her thought far, far more than I would like to know what Diko said and when. That is not the point.

In Mambila tradition before making a long journey you should go to a senior, the Chief, a parent or someone with 'strong medicine'. They will bless you, spitting and rubbing their knuckles on your sternum, saying onomatopoeically 'kusum', so that your journey is safe, so you will return to the village.

Often I visited Diko's house the night before I travelled for her blessing, or sometimes I would jump out of the car just before departure, since her house is on the

road out of the village. Now I know I must make do with the blessings she has already given me.

Kusum, kusum. Be strong, be safe.