



SALLY CHILVER

Drawing By Rachel Hemming Bray, 1995

**'MAMA FOR STORY':
STUDIES IN THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF CAMEROON
IN HONOUR OF SALLY CHILVER**

INTRODUCTION TO THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

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THE work of Sally Chilver has played a highly significant role over several generations of research in the Cameroonian Grassfields in the intersecting fields of anthropology and history. It exemplifies the convergence of ethnography and history in the field of Cameroonian studies. This collection of essays celebrates that work—each contribution touches on different aspects of the relationship of history and anthropology. History is illuminated by, and in much of Africa cannot be practised without, appreciation of the methods of anthropological fieldwork. Conversely, ethnography is enriched and enabled by the depth and awareness of change that follows the adoption of a historical perspective. Through her work Sally Chilver has brought the complexity of the Cameroonian Grassfields, its history, material culture and ethnography to the attention of Africanist scholars.

This special issue of *JASO* is the culmination of a broader project that celebrates the work of Sally Chilver. All the contributors to this issue of the journal and to its sister publications (Fowler and Zeitlyn 1995, 1996) feel personally in her debt, and welcomed this opportunity to contribute to the project. Certainly, many of us associated with Sally Chilver have long given thought to ways in which her important contributions to Cameroon studies might be satisfactorily acknowledged. The idea of a Festschrift was widely shared. At the last meeting of the Grassfields Working Group held in Oxford (organized by Sally Chilver) a number of us, notably Shirley Ardener and Professors Miriam Goheen, Eugenia Shanklin, Claude Tardits, Charles-

Henry Pradelles and Jean-Pierre Warnier, took the opportunity to conspire. The broader project of which this special issue of *JASO* forms a part is the welcome outcome of that happy conspiracy.

The papers presented here deal with the ethnographic complexity which any historical synthesis must confront. *JASO* is a fitting place for their publication since this reflects the long-standing relationship between Edwin Ardener (the founder of *JASO*), Shirley Ardener and Sally Chilver. As if to further emphasise this, the first two volumes of the new Cameroon Studies Series consist of Edwin Ardener's collected papers on Cameroon and our volume for Sally. In addition to these personal and intellectual connections there is the Oxford connection, which continues to this day. Sally Chilver's links with Oxford encompass both formal and informal academic sectors. On the one hand institutional ties: as Somerville undergraduate, and later Director of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies at Oxford and Principal of Lady Margaret Hall; on the other a more informal role as an Africanist historian and ethnographer enriching the Oxford academic scene at the same time as she nurtured young Cameroonists and Cameroonian students and scholars.

Issues to do with representations of identity have always been a strong undercurrent in anthropology. However, since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the eruption of 'ethnic' conflict in Europe identity has become the object of more focused attention. It has been said that Africa exists in its very own temporal space but in this instance there is an approximate simultaneity in the chronology of events, interpretation and action. Here, too, the qualities and meaning of identity in cultural practice and political representation are deeply questioned in the context of the post-colonial African state. There are significant convergences and parallels, in both the events of Europe and Africa and the knowledge that is created in the interpretation of them, that remain to be explored.

Sally Chilver's life and academic endeavour significantly encompass all of these things. It is for this reason that we have included a biographical sketch as the introductory paper to this collection of essays. In so doing we mark, at least implicitly, the mutually constitutive qualities of actor, action and context. It is indisputable that as anthropologists and historians we may come to play significant roles in the production of the kinds of knowledge that tie in to the emergence of broad social and political groupings in the context of the colony and the post-colony. It is, perhaps, also inevitable that such knowledge may be incorporated into the armoury of the contemporary struggle for definition of locality and its articulation with the agents and offices of the post-colonial state. If identity is constantly reworked it is none the less fixed in narratives of the past. Since the early colonial period classification has been both a process of self-classification as well as classification by administrative officers and, latterly, by academics both expatriate and indigenous. In these two key and related areas Sally Chilver has played, and continues to play a major and dove-tailing role in the production of knowledge for and of the Grassfields.

In a broader context Sally Chilver's contribution to the Africanist worldview and the knowledge contained and generated by it is also highly significant. At a time when it was, perhaps, less than fashionable, Sally—to quote from Shirley Ardener's preface to *African Crossroads*—first went out to the field as 'an apprentice historian in stout boots' in the company of the anthropologist Phyllis Kaberry. This personal and academic alliance flouted the established academic bias in anthropology that eschewed the knowledge of missionary, administrator and trader in favour of the monopoly of the professional ethnographer. Happily, for those of us who have followed into the field, Chilver's work with Kaberry did more than simply help to neutralise the effects of this disciplinary bias against history (see Warnier's contribution in Fowler and Zeitlyn 1996).

The nature of the histories Sally Chilver has pursued are equally significant. Her methodological approach is that of thick description applied at a series of levels from paramount to descent-group head. The salient pay-offs from this approach are, we believe, clearly demonstrated in the paired papers presented here that focus on historical issues. In the first instance Zeitlyn offers a recension of Eldridge Mohammadou's far broader regional depiction of the history of Central Cameroon. The rebuttal of Mohammadou's case is presented in the form of a letter from Sally Chilver to Verkijika Fanzo, a senior Cameroonian academic. We have also included a paper by Jean Hurault that deals with the history of the chiefdom of Sonkolong. This represents a different, more geographically focused approach to the history of this region that draws in findings from settlement patterns, field archaeology and satellite photographs in addition to local history and oral tradition.

It is certainly the case that Chilver has retained her focus on historical issues in her archivist reworking of her own fieldnotes and those of Kaberry, and in on-going correspondence with Cameroonian colleagues. Yet she has become far more of an anthropologist than she might perhaps care to admit. A recently published paper on thaumaturgical belief in Nso' (Chilver 1990) is a case in point. Not only has it been widely quoted in literature on the Grassfields but, more importantly, it has significantly advanced our knowledge of African religious belief in a region for which such knowledge has till now been sorely lacking.

The papers by Baeke, Gufler, Pradelles and Koloss reflect the ethnographic vein of her work. Viviane Baeke, a student of Luc de Heusch, presents an elaborate account of Wuli cosmology in the spirit of Chilver's 1990 paper, but reflecting also a greater concern for the structural implications of the beliefs and practices she describes. The density of documentation and analysis provided by Baeke is still all too rare among studies of the Grassfields region.

Charles-Henry Pradelles pays homage to Sally Chilver in a paper which links his recent work among the Péré with Chilver's ethnographic and historical research in Bali-Nyonga. The Péré represent one part of a confederated raiding band that arrived in the Grassfields in the first quarter of the

nineteenth century under the Chamba leader Gawolbe. Pradelles has traced a ritual thread that links the present-day Péré of the Tignère region of Adamawa Province and the Péré of Bali-Nyonga.

Hermann Gufler is a Catholic missionary, parish priest of Sabongari at the far north of the North-West province. His paper provides an example of how one missionary, inspired in part by his continuing correspondence with Sally Chilver, has built on the knowledge left by another. In this case Gufler, in collaboration with a local Yamba informant, has returned to one of the classic studies of the area: Paul Gebauer's monograph on spider divination. Through a series of conversations with Pa Monday of Gom as well as with other diviners, Gufler is able to update and re-analyse Gebauer's account of the system of *ngam* divination, a system which is not confined to the Yamba, but is found throughout the southern half of Cameroon.

Much thought has gone into the transliteration of the indigenous terms in the articles that follow. Because the native languages of the researchers include English, German, and French there is variation in the transliteration conventions used. We have not attempted to impose a uniform system on the authors. It is increasingly common to use the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) to provide consistent representation, and this has been used in some of the articles below. It is hoped that readers will not find the inconsistency between papers obtrusive. One additional point on transcription is worth making: we have followed the convention of using upper-case B for the implosive-b in FulBe, as the Fulani are now called in the anglo-phone tradition.

In presenting this ensemble of papers we seek to illustrate not only the complexity of Cameroonian society, but also the extent to which Sally Chilver has helped to influence and shape our understanding of the history and anthropology of the area.

REFERENCES

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