

## THE INITIATION OF THE *DUGI* AMONG THE PÉRÉ

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THE initiation ceremony of Péré medicine men (*dugi*) is of particular relevance to this collection of papers since, as I will demonstrate, an element of it is remembered by Péré in the Grassfields of Cameroon who left their original home in the north, at the beginning of the century, in the train of their close allies, the Chamba, to settle finally with Bali-Nyonga, in the western Grassfields. This paper describes the ceremony as a small contribution to the ethnography of the Bali-Nyonga as studied by Sally Chilver.

The Péré of the north, who at present number some twenty thousand, occupy a remote plain in Adamawa Province. This plain is closed off to the north by the Faro game reserve, to the west by the Nigerian border, and to the south and east by the high plateau of Tignère. While a certain number of Péré are gathered into settlements such as Koncha, Mayo-Baléo, Gadjiwan and Almé, the great majority still live in scattered hamlets, the sites of which are changed approximately once a decade. A hamlet generally comprises a man, his wives, children, and married sons, and some of his uterine nephews. At his death, his sons inherit the huts while his nephews inherit the other goods such as granaries, cattle and access to hunting and fishing sites. Thus, while the hamlet is patrilocal, the kinship system is

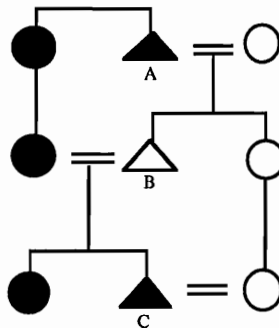
I thank Gabriel Gbadamosi for helping me translate this paper from French into English and for discussing it with me.

firmly matrilineal, with the Péré recognizing about twenty matrilineal clans.

*Dugi* are medicine men who inherit a ritual store (*dugo*) in which is hidden sacred musical instruments representing a clan's magical force (*gérem*). Some *dugi* inherit only iron bells which are hidden in a *dugo*, a pot placed just outside their compound. Others inherit, in addition to the bells, trumpets made of linked calabashes. In this case, the *dugo* may be a small hut built nearby in the bush. The iron bells are used in curing illnesses, particularly barrenness in women. The trumpets have a prominent place in initiation ceremonies and are also used against sorcerers and played at a *dugi's* funeral. Although the different *dugi* are ranked, all must undergo the same initiation ritual in order to use the power of the *gérem*.

In some parts of the plain less influenced by Islam, like the canton of Almé, the heads of certain hamlets are *dugi*. In these instances possession and transmission of the *gérem* settled in the *dugo* reinforce the traditional marriage alliances between clans. This can be seen from the fact that although the *gérem* is the permanent property of a matrilineal clan, its *dugo* is always inherited patrilineally, from father to son. For a *gérem* to remain the property of its matrilineal clan, a *dugi* must marry a patrilineal cross-cousin (a woman of the matrilineal clan of his father). In this way a *gérem* is possessed every second generation by a member of the matrilineal clan, and two clans are linked by repeated matrimonial alliances (see Fig. 1).

FIG.1. Clan of the *Gérem*



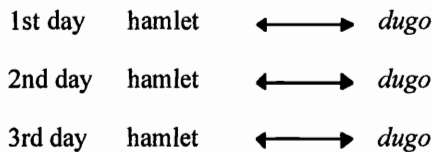
If A transmits the *gérem* (belonging to his clan, shown in black) to his son B, and if B marries his father's sister's daughter, his son C, the next heritor in the *gérem*, will belong to the same clan as his father's father, A. The *dugi*, who are thus obliged to repeat preferential marriage alliances, embody the traditional social order of the Péré; the *gérem* is not only a magical power but also a social law.

It is in this double aspect that the *gérem* presides over the initiation of all young boys. This important ceremony, which I have described

elsewhere (1988), takes place over three days. On the first day, young boys of five or six years old are frightened by the terrifying roar of the unseen *gérem*, 'the animal which is going to swallow them', represented by their elder siblings, who blow on the trumpets taken from the *dugo*. Pursued by the roaring of the *gérem*, which they cannot see, the boys are taken to the hamlet of the *dugi*, who directs the initiation. On arrival, the boys are ritually purified beside the *dugo* (a small hut) and then taken inside a hut in the hamlet, outside of which the *gérem*, seeming to attack, becomes more and more menacing as the night wears on. On the second day, the most important period of the ritual, the novices lie face down on the ground in rows, holding over their eyes 'the leaf of death' which prevents them from seeing the different scenes being played over them by their elder siblings and the *dugi* in order to terrify them. One by one, they mime the devouring *gérem*, the monkeys who scratch and whip the novices with branches, and finally the devastating tornado which soaks and floods them. The boys, holding 'the leaf of death' over their eyes, are blind to the action and may be considered to be at the blind spot of the event, thus in both these senses enacting a symbolic death of the gaze. After this, the *dugi* reveal to them the musical instruments representing the *gérem* and make them swear never to speak of this to the women. The young initiates, thus set apart from their mothers by this exclusive knowledge, learn ritually on the third day to sieve millet beer and play the drums, thereby being reintegrated into social life.

The three phases of this rite of passage are centred on two locations: the hamlet where the children pass all three nights, and the *dugo* around which the initiation unfolds (see Fig. 2).

FIG. 2



The boys are initiated in the very place where the mystery of the *gérem* is located, but they nevertheless remain symbolically of the hamlet.

An adolescent who chooses to follow his father and become a *dugi* must undergo a supplementary initiation, which I have never seen but which has been described to me independently by four experienced *dugi*. As with the ceremony described above, a senior *dugi* decides when to celebrate the initiation ritual, usually when enough novices have let their decision be known. At the last ceremony, in 1985, twenty young *dugi* were initiated. The host *dugi* invites his colleagues to come three days in ad-

vance to clear a 'threshing floor' (*koo*) in the bush near his *dugo* and to prepare the millet beer which will be drunk by the participants.

On the day, the *dugi* novices gather in the *koo*. Crouched on the ground, bare from the waist up and with their heads lowered, they are made to submit to their elder *dugi*. At nightfall they are led out of the *koo* to stand in the open space in front of the hamlet. The principal *dugi* takes the iron bells from the pot, puts them on the ground and pours beer over them, saying: *Fuum mani ai, zoba* ('Here is your beer, drink it'). He then puts on them the mash left over from the distillation of the beer, saying: 'You ask, but why don't you give me the mash left over from the beer? Here it is.' The *dugi* then sits down in the middle of the open space in front of a full calabash of millet beer. One by one, the novices come to offer him 25 Fr CFA and crouch in front of him. For each of them, the *dugi* cuts a piece of creeper (*Cissus quadrangulis*) called *gaamb sembale* ('male medicine') over the calabash with an iron bell. It is said that 'the gérem cuts the medicine', and it is a favourable sign if the small pieces of the *gaamb sembale* dropped into the beer rise quickly again to the surface. The *dugi* then drops into the beer a sprig of grass called *mageré*, which he stirs around with an iron bell in order to see whether or not it comes to rest in front of the novice before him. He repeats the process as often as is necessary for the *mageré* to stop in the required position, and, as in the conduct of therapeutic cures which use exactly the same procedure, the *dugi* may occasionally ask questions of the novice to shed light on some difficult areas of his life. When this has been successfully concluded, the *dugi* takes the calabash and places it on the head of the novice, saying: 'Let your body be strong.' The *dugi* then makes him drink some of the beer and rubs his right hand with the *gaamb sembale*, saying: 'If a person is sick you will take the *gérem* to work on them. When you are a *dugi* you will rub on the medicine as I have just done with you, so that the sickness goes.' After this procedure is complete, there is a short break. The novices then again offer, each in turn, 25 Fr CFA to the officiating *dugi* and he repeats for each of them exactly the same ritual, only this time with the *gaamb kaanlé*, 'female medicine', which is made from the bulbs of wild hyacinth (*Pancreatim hirtum*). Both parts of the ceremony continue into the night.

At first light, each novice picks up a stone, places it on his head and puts it beside the *dugo* in a heap. The stones are used by the elder *dugi* to check on the number of initiates and to see whether they have all paid their dues. The *dugi*, armed with whips made out of grass rope, thrash the bare torsos of the novices who must not flinch in spite of the weals raised on their skin. After this test of courage, the novices cross the *dugo*, entering from the east, 'where things begin', and going out to the west, 'where life ends'.<sup>1</sup> The initiates continue on into the bush accompanied by their elders, and in order to participate in the last part of the ritual each of the ini-

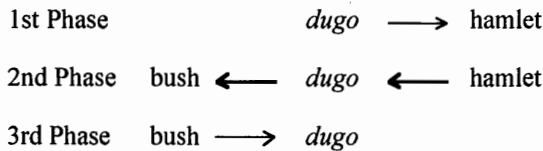
1. The Péré bury their dead with feet pointing to the west.

tiates gathers three pieces of wood: *kiinbo* (*Savadora persica*), *kitari* (*Unes piliformis*) and *samvorum* (*Brenadia salicina*).

On their return to the *dugo*, initiates and *dugi* hold each other by the shoulder in a long line, while the officiating *dugi*, at the head of the line, sacrifices a young chicken and then ties it, with his own three pieces of wood, by a long string to the supporting post on the right of the entrance to the *dugo*. It is in this way, using wood, chicken and string, that the *dugi* makes the *som*, also known as *saang waalé*, 'the strong taboo'. The *som* is supposed to make the intestines of wrong-doers come out through their anus, as occurs to the chicken when the *dugi* wraps the string tightly around its body. When the *som* is thus attached to the *dugo*, all the participants in turn rub on it pieces of *gaamb sembale* (male medicine), saying: *mani a kuma lo, fun mani voma* ('You, you stay here, let your body be strong'). Thereafter each of the initiates makes his own *som*, which he takes home with him and places in his front yard or in a *dugo*, if he already has one. Finally, to close the ceremony, the initiates weave a small bracelet of grass called *tung* (*Andetia simplex*) as a sign of their initiation, which they will wear on their wrist until it falls to pieces.

Inasmuch as the initiation of young boys is a rite of separation, that of young *dugi* is one of assimilation. Even though the two rituals are not comparable in purpose, their respective relationships to the hamlet and the *dugo* are significantly reversed. If the first rite revolves around the hamlet, to which the young initiates return to sleep every night (see Fig. 2), the second rite revolves around the *dugo* outside the hamlet (see Fig. 3).

FIG. 3



These relocations during the three phases of this second rite, makes it clear that the novices set out from the *dugo* and return there at the end. In understanding the significance of this in the initiation of a *dugi*, it should again be noted that during the central part of this rite the novices pass through the *dugo*, which thereby acts as a kind of gateway between the village and the bush. This demonstrates the *dugi* as belonging to two worlds. As can be seen with the *dugo* and the *gérem*, by their double mode of transmission (patrilineal and matrilineal), they are social, belonging to the hamlet, whereas by virtue of the access they give the *dugi* to the power of the bush, they are wild, powerful and not at all a part of the social structure. They, like the *som* or charm, are magical. Magic is always in this sense, ambivalent, being both of the social order and outside it.

After eleven months of fieldwork among the northern Péré, I passed through Bali-Nyonga in order to meet the leader of the southern Péré. He was very easy to find and very approachable, dressed in European clothes with a large umbrella tucked under his arm. I greeted him in the language of the Péré, but he no longer knew it, so we spoke in pidgin for the rest of the interview. His name was Dinga. His father had also lived in Bali-Nyonga, but his father's father had lived in Bali-Kumbat, some fifty kilometres to the east. Considering himself to be the direct heir of his father and grandfather, Dinga had become patrilineal and had completely forgotten the matrilineal clan system of the north. Neither his mother nor grandmother were Péré. For this reason he did not know the name of any of the matrilineal clans. A little taken aback at the beginning of this interview, I asked him if he knew anything about the *gérem*. His face lit up and he answered yes. 'So,' I enquired, 'you have some trumpets made out of calabashes?' 'No,' he said, with surprise. 'But you have iron bells?' 'No, not at all,' he continued to insist. 'In that case, what *is* the *gérem* for you?' To this he answered very indirectly, and it was only because I already knew about the *gérem* that he consented to tell me. It still took me some time to understand that for him the *gérem* is a charm which is made by sacrificing a chicken, around which are attached three small pieces of wood. 'But that's the *som*!' I exclaimed. 'No, it's the *gérem*,' he replied. Clearly, he no longer knew anything about the initiation of the *dugi*, but the most secret element of that ceremony had stayed in the memory of the southern Péré.

So why is it that the *gérem* has become the *som* for the migrant Péré? The Chamba, who are what is known as 'joking partners' of the Péré of the north, also use trumpets made of calabashes as sacred instruments. The Chamba of the south still use them in the celebration of the *voma*, which takes place at the beginning of their new year. It can perhaps be suggested that, given their even closer relationship with the Péré in the south, these trumpets could no longer constitute a token of separation for the Péré between themselves and others. The sacred, or magical, property of their word *gérem*, linked to these trumpets, has been transferred to the *som* of the *dugi*, or 'strong taboo', where it can again constitute the distinct, and secret, social identity of the southern Péré.

On this journey south, I was surprised to see how quickly a tradition could be forgotten—excepting certain elements, within only three generations. What we study is very fragile.

#### REFERENCE

- PRADELLES DE LATOUR DEJEAN, CHARLES-HENRY 1988. 'Le regard conjuré', *Littoral*, Vol. XXVII-XXVIII, pp. 109-19.