

HISTORY OF THE MAMBILA CHIEFDOM OF MBOR (SONKOLONG)

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Introduction

At a time still impossible to date precisely, but possibly several centuries before the conquest of the Adamawa plateau by the Fulani (FulBe), the Mvwop lived on the southern border of the Mambila plateau, at an average altitude of 1700m. Some groups began to found colonies on the Tikar plain, 1000m lower (average altitude 750m), possibly being attracted by resources unknown on the plateau, viz. palm oil and fish.

At the foot of the escarpment they found some groups of Mambila and other small populations of diverse origins. These combined to drive out the Tikar who occupied almost all of the plain. The association of these elements gave rise to three chiefdoms, Somié (Ndeba), Sonkolong (Mbor) and Atta (Ta).¹ In the text which follows I concentrate on Sonkolong but include its links with Atta. The two chiefdoms are said to have been founded by two brothers and to have kept strong links. In 1899 they were attacked simultaneously and suffered similar disasters.

1. The names Songkolong, Atta and Somié were given by the FulBe but are now in common use.

Methodology

I have adopted a global approach to these disorganised populations, now defunct, using the methodologies of geography, ethno-history and demography. The collection of oral tradition can be significantly improved by a preliminary study of the topography and environmental conditions. I therefore think it necessary to undertake a detailed survey of the landscape of the villages under study with the help of competent guides. Specific traditions may associated with particular features of the landscape (such as springs, ravines or outcrops), and while notables would not mention them in general conversation, they are, nevertheless, important pointers in the search for the past. In principle, a thorough knowledge of the topography creates a common understanding between the investigator and the notables, reducing the risks of omissions and mistakes.

In the absence of archaeological research data, oral traditions must be analysed together with archive documents (where they exist) as well as the results of direct observation. In this case, traces of fortifications and occasionally buildings have helped the historical reconstruction. The data for this paper was collected between 1981 and 1985 during research on the geography and demography of the western Adamawa highlands. The main objective of my research on the Tikar plain was to determine the effects of the slave raids from the Fulani kingdom of Banyo which probably began as early as 1830–40.

Topography

The territory of Sonkolong is dominated by the granite mountain range which surrounds it and whose summits, Njio, Tor Mvwo, Mansam and Tor Nyuo, rise above the plain by some two hundred metres (see Map. 1).

This site offers three advantages: proximity to the rocky heights, which can be used as refuges; year-round availability of drinking water; and the superior quality of the soil at the foot of the mountains.² This accounts for the sites of the ancient villages of the Ndobu, Kpatschula and Pfwá (Ndégétwom) as well as the successive sites of the Sonkolong chiefdom, Mbamban, Manyam and Mvurgwen. A very old trade route linking the Nso' country to the present Banyo region goes along the southern slope of the mountainous massif. This path was used by the Fulani of Banyo in their raids against the Nso'. From the height of Njio mountain the Mambila, entrenched at Ndégétwom, were able to see the raiding parties

2. At the end of the dry season the secondary streams are dry, except where they are fed by springs situated at the foot of the mountains. The good quality of the soil is a result of the alluvia brought down from the slopes.

Moreover, he had the reputation of fabricating stories or at least not always giving the same version of his recollections. I have therefore chosen the list given by Mgbe Ndégétwom Séo, which was agreed during a meeting of the notables convened on 2 February 1985. I have indicated its main differences with Garba Bani's list. The latter, nevertheless, contains certain useful elements, particularly an estimate of the length of reigns.

	NAME	SON OF ³	NOTES
A	Gwalé	?	
B	Yabon	?	Took the chieftdom to Ndégétwom from Mbamban
C	Wé (Kélamé)	?	
D	Yé	A	Agreed to become tributary to Banyo. Committed suicide by hanging himself.
E	Kéa	A	
F	Nju (Ndijolomo)	E	Is said to have had a very short reign.
G	Wakatsha	?	Name mentioned in Garba Bani's list. The notables have heard this name but cannot place it.
H	Londam	D	Chief at the time of the attack by troops from Banyo. Is said to have been captured and executed in Banyo.
I	Yaji (Yilayor)	E	Opposed to Londam, took refuge in Banyo. Was then imposed as chief. Contracted leprosy and had to leave the chieftdom. Died in Banyo.
J	Kémé	C	Removed by the Germans because he had sold some of the people in the village. Imprisoned in Banyo. Is said to have retired to Pfwa.
K	Gwa	I	Took the chieftdom to Manyan. Was chief when the British arrived in 1915.
L	Kèr	I	Stayed in Manyan, where he is buried.
M	Bawuro	I	Took the chieftdom back to Mbamban where he is buried.
N	Gwa (Hamidu)	L	Reigning since 1961.

Garba-Bani's typed list, dated 7 July 1982, is as follows:

- (1) Goualeu son of the prophet Goualeu (came down with wings)
- (2) Yaboon son of Goualeu
- (3) Kea son of Yabon
- (4) Yie son of Yabon
- (5) Ndijolomo son of Yie
- (6) Wakatcha son of Yie
- (7) Lodam son of Yie
- (8) Yialayor son of Yie (twelve-year reign)

3. The filiation of the chiefs before Yaji is not absolutely certain.

- (9) Keme son of Wakatcha (four-year reign)
- (10) Goualeu son of Yialayor (seventeen-year reign)
- (11) Mgbekeme son of Wakatcha (two-and-a-half-year reign)
- (12) Kea son of Yia (fifteen-year reign)
- (13) Baourou son of Yia (thirty-seven-year reign)
- (14) Gouah Hamidou son of Kea, acceded in 1961.

The same note tells us that Mgbekeme used to make human sacrifices and that he sold his subjects as slaves. There seems to be some confusion between Kémé and Mgbekeme, who may be one-and-the-same person. Indeed we know, through precise traditions, that Kémé was removed and imprisoned for involvement in slave trading towards the end of the German period. If we accept Garba-Gani's chronology, this would have taken place after 1930; but this is not feasible, since at that time the Tikar plain was under French administration.

The lengths of the reigns cannot be accepted as stated. It is an established fact that Gwa was nominated during the German period, therefore before 1915. Also, the total duration of reigns numbered above as 10, 12 and 13 comes to 69 years—yet there are only 46 years between 1915 and 1961.

Phases in the History of Sonkolong

First phase: the chiefdom in Mbamban

This first phase may have lasted several centuries but only a few events are recalled. The Mvwop Mambila encountered the Pfwá Mambila on the perimeter of the Ndégétwom massif. They also found other smaller groups who had been pushed back by the Tikar and who paid tribute to them, the Kpatshula, the Ndetom and the Ndobó. Their ethnic origins are uncertain and their languages have been lost save for a few words. These archaic populations were probably the ancient occupiers of the plain. They had to unite with the Mvwop Mambila to drive out the Mbiridjom and Mbirikpa Tikar. The latter left for what is now the region of Sabongari, twenty kilometres to the north-west. The Mbiridjom rebuilt their village thirty kilometres to the south, where their descendants still lived in the 1980s.

A new organization, founded on a kind of symbiosis, was formed around the Mvwop Mambila. The autochthones retained their chiefs in the guise of notables of the new chiefdom endowed with religious functions.⁴ The Pfwá desired autonomy and left Ndégétwom for the old Mbirikpa site, five kilometres to the north-west, where they created the fortified village of

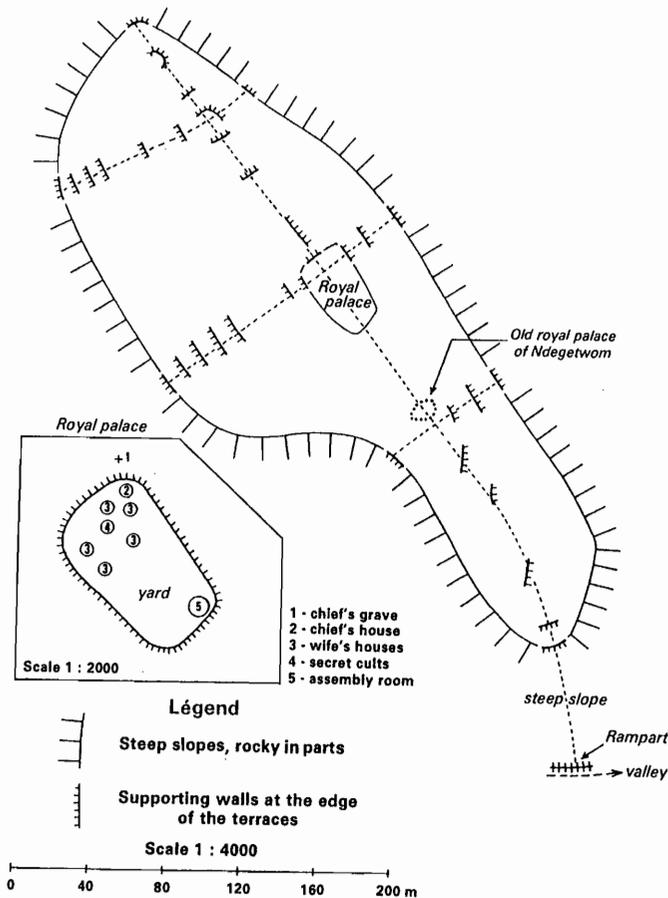
4. This is why the Kpatshula start the *sua* rites each year.

Pfwabang, the trench of the Pfwá. But some of them remained behind and their chief, Mgbwe Ndégétwom, became the main notable.

Second phase: Ndégétwom and the fight against the FulBe

When the FulBe began their raids on the Tikar plain, chief Yabon left the Mbamban site and assembled the population at Ndégétwom. He was the founder of the chiefdom and is buried there (see Fig. 1), as is his successor Wé (Kélamé?), of whom we know nothing else. It seems that it was during the reign of Yé, son of Yabon, that Sonkolong became tributary to Banyo, in circumstances which are not remembered.

FIG. 1. The site of Ndégétwom



Each year, messengers from Banyo came to demand slaves. The numbers demanded were represented by small sticks attached to strings: long ones for adults, short for children, white for males and black for females. We cannot be precise as to the scale of these annual demands. The Mambila of Sonkolong tried to fulfil these demands by raiding the Tikar or the Bamum but they were forced to give up some of their own children and the village faced depopulation.

On 30 January 1983 the notable Mgbwé Ndégétwom Séo related the death of chief Yé as follows:

One day he assembled the notables in the central courtyard of the chief and told them that he was of no use anymore but had to choose children in the village to give to the Lamido of Banyo. It was better that he should die. He hung himself from a tree, followed by his first wife. The notables wanted to follow him. All of them, men and women, more than twenty people, hung themselves from the trees bordering the courtyard of the chiefdom.

This act of collective despair does not seem to have moderated the demands from Banyo. Chief Kea, brother and successor to Ye, had still to deliver slaves.

After him came Nju (Njolomo), who is said to have reigned for only one month. His successor is said to have been Wakatsha, about whom nothing is known.

Then came the reign of Londam, son of Yé. He had been in conflict with Yaji, son of Kéa, who took refuge at the court of the Lamido of Banyo. It is said that he preferred to give as slaves his rival's close relatives. He was not liked by the people.

The population of Sonkolong may have reached two thousand at that time. That of Atta was of similar importance (see below).

The attack on Ndégétwom

In 1899, roughly two years before the arrival of the Germans, the envoys of the Lamido demanded an unusually large number of slaves (one hundred, it was said). Chief Londam refused. We do not know exactly what happened in Atta but the two chiefdoms were too closely linked to take opposite positions. The Lamido Umaru sent a punitive expedition, but it was during the rainy season and he did not succeed in gathering enough men. His troops attacked Ndégétwom but was pushed back and had to retreat.

The following dry season, Umaru sent a large expedition to attack Sonkolong and Atta in turn. After several assaults his forces managed to get over the defensive wall of Ndégétwom. When they saw that the attackers had penetrated the village, many inhabitants, including young men and women, hung themselves. In retaliation for their losses the soldiers of

the Lamido killed many people. It is said that they tied old men to bundles of roofing straw and burned them alive. When they assembled the prisoners, many refused to leave and were killed on the spot, men and women alike.⁵

Chief Londam, whom the population hated, had left the village after the first unsuccessful FulBe attack and had taken refuge at Kwa, a small village dependent on Atta. There are several versions of his death. In one, the troops of Banyo, having occupied Sonkolong, turned to Atta and forced the chief to hand over Londam, who was then either killed immediately or taken to Banyo and strangled in the prison of the chiefdom. However, in the second version, which is corroborated by the typescript of 7 July 1982, Londam escaped the search by the assailants. Yaji, who was imposed as chief of Sonkolong by the Lamido Umaru, forced the chief of Atta to give Londam over to him. He then sent him to Banyo, where he was executed.

The village of Atta was attacked a few days after Sonkolong, its defensive positions overcome and the survivors raided. The inhabitants of Atta have no precise tradition recalling the course of the conflict. The Banyo troops left the country without leaving any detachments behind but simply gathering prisoners from both villages and going back home.

Djao, an ex-servant of the Lamido born around 1884, whom I interviewed in the 1970s, had seen the expedition return. According to the accounts of the participants, they did not bring back more than three hundred prisoners, some having escaped during the journey. He remembers that he heard someone say, 'we have not brought back many slaves, but we have killed many'. Horedjo Abdoullaye, who was born around 1902 and is presently the oldest notable of the Banyo chiefdom, reckoned in his youth that the numbers were between two hundred and three hundred. According to data which dates from after the first census, no more than four hundred people from both villages would have escaped death or capture. Some of the survivors went back to the plateau, to the territory of the original Mvwop, which was by then almost uninhabited. Others hid in the forest. Yaji, who had been nominated chief of Sonkolong by the Lamido Umaru, regrouped a small core of the population in Ndégétwom. It appears therefore that some eighty per cent of a population of four thousand had been destroyed in order to bring back two hundred and fifty slaves, which, at that time, was regarded as perfectly normal.

Sonkolong in the German period

The German authorities confirmed Yaji as chief of Sonkolong, and the population which had escaped the raids was able to regroup around him.

5. These accounts are fully confirmed by the traditions of the Banyo chiefdom. Suicide was a common response of raided populations, either by hanging or by refusing to be taken into slavery and being killed on the spot.

However, they suspected that he had given the Lamido the idea for his devastating raid while he had been a refugee in Banyo. He contracted leprosy and had to leave the village to search for a cure in Banyo, where he died. His successor was Kémé, son of Wé, who took the chieftdom to Mvurgwen, to the south-east of the Tor Mvwo mountain. As conditions now seemed safe, there was no more need to stay in such a constricted site as Ndégétwom. As mentioned above, Kémé was dismissed by the German authorities following accusations of slave-dealing and was imprisoned in Banyo. After his release he went to Pfwá, where he died. He was replaced by Gwa, son of Yaji.

As soon as they were established in Banyo, the Germans began to transform the trade route which linked Nso' to the Vuté country into a road, setting up a network of staging posts. One of these was situated at a place called Manyam, near the river Mbam, and was maintained by the inhabitants of Sonkolong. This is why Gwa established the chieftdom at Manyam.

Sonkolong since 1915

We know little of the two chiefs called Gwa and Ker, who both lived in Manyam, where they are buried in individual tombs protected by shelters of corrugated metal. However, in 1921 a census was conducted by the administrator F. Lozet, the oldest document we can refer to for the French period. The 1953 census, conducted with the greatest of care by the administrator J. Sablayrolles, is the last document which records an homogenous Mambila population. It shows that half a century after the massacre of 1899, the population of Atta and Sonkolong, with its low birth rate, had reached a level roughly equivalent to a quarter of the numbers estimated for the end of the nineteenth century.

The archival documents⁶ give the following figures for Sonkolong:

Date	Adults (male)	Adults (female)	Children	Total
1921	80	63	57	200
1927	58	59	84	201
1930	60	61	82	203
1934	48	47	66	161
1953	132	125	281	538

In 1955, with the help of Mr Joseph Dountio of the Centre Géographique National of Yaoundé, I conducted a demographic study of Atta. This study showed that the birth rate was very high, reaching an average of 8 children per woman who had reached menopause (Hurault 1969, 1970).

6. Governmental archives, Yaoundé, APA 11.901, Census of the Banyo subdivision by F. Lozet and files within APA 11.782B (references communicated by David Zeitlyn).

After 1953, the French administration put a lot of effort into introducing the cultivation of Robusta coffee to the Tikar plain. These plantations became fully productive around 1958–60 and entirely transformed the economy of the Mambila villages in the plain, which up to then had depended on subsistence agriculture. Roads were also built, bringing in an influx of migrants of many different ethnicities. The population increased greatly, as can be seen in the 1983–84 census conducted by the newly created Bankim sub-prefecture:

Sonkolong	2314
Atta	3810
Somié	1650

At the present day the Mambila are in a minority in these villages and are mixed with Tikar, Yamba and Hausa. More detailed research would be needed to determine the exact number of Mambila, but it appears that their number has doubled since 1953.

Appendix: Fortified Sites Linked to the History of Sonkolong and Atta

The fortified sites of Sonkolong and Atta have been the object of field-work, topographical surveys and aerial photography. For reasons of space, only one of these surveys will be presented here.

Apart from the site of Ndégétwom, where the remains of buildings have been observed,⁷ I have evaluated population densities for old villages of the Banyo highlands (which are low by comparison with the compact habitats of the 'Kirdi' of north Cameroon before they came down to the plains). For Banyo I have allowed:

areas of habitat without granaries:	4.0 persons per 100 square metres
habitat with granaries:	2.0 persons per 100 square metres

The first figure can be applied to the fortified camps of the Vuté where the villagers took refuge during short raids only. The second can be applied to the fortified villages, where the population lived permanently with all its grain reserves.

7. Cultivation, together with the action of termites, has the effect that defensive ditches are quickly filled in as soon as the forest is cleared. Walls are less affected. The height of what remains is the most significant indication of the time at which a site was abandoned. Over the whole of the Tikar plain, the fortified sites—which according to specific traditions were used against the FulBe—still retain some of their walls (reaching a minimum height of between 0.80m and 1 metre), although the state of the ditches is variable.

For the Mambila of the plain we can accept that the main part of the crop was stored in the fields (mostly consisting of root crops, which were left in the ground). Assuming that half the cereal harvest was stored within the village, I have allowed an average density of 3.0 persons per 100 square metres. This evaluation process is, of course, merely a first approach to the problem and was only applied to the smallest of the fortified sites. For the more important villages, I have taken into account the space which was clearly reserved for defensive, social and religious use as well as communication routes. The fortified area of Mbamban, where Sonkolong was first established, had a circumference of 1,200 metres and a surface area of 19 hectares. My calculations suggest a population of 4,300 people.

Ndégétwom

At the end of the twentieth century, the population of Sonkolong had entirely regrouped at Ndégétwom, at the summit of a semi-rocky ridge detached from the Tor Mvwo granite massif. Most of its perimeter is protected by very steep slopes and the site is only accessible via the southern pass, which links it to the Tor Njio mountain. This pass had been barred by a ditch and a wall.

Before the arrival of the Mbor Mambila, Ndégétwom had been occupied by the Mambila Pfwá. A small number of them still live in Sonkolong and still recall the site of their chiefdom.

Nowadays the site of Ndégétwom and the surrounding mountains are covered by a dense forest with an undergrowth of urticaceous plants which make clearing the sites difficult. The survey I undertook on 1 February 1985 with a compass and measuring line was restricted therefore to the line of the ridge and three perpendicular tracks. I found evidence of careful terracing—the work of individuals, since the levels of the terraces do not line up with one another. They are delimited by dry stone walls which frequently reach a height of 5 to 6 metres and even 10 to 12 metres where the slopes are very steep. The areas inside are well levelled.

The royal palace was sited at the summit, on a levelled area in the shape of a trapezoid surrounded by the supporting wall of the adjacent terraces. This site is 45m long and 22–26m wide. It is probable that it spread towards the north to another terrace because the communal tomb of the chief is outside. Moreover, we know that there were forty huts for women, barely fifteen of which could have fitted on the main terrace. The eroded walls of the chief's house (diameter 4m) could be seen in the area which had been cleared properly, together with five huts for women, a hut for secret cults and the hut used for the gatherings of notables (diameter 5m). There also was a small space used for ceremonies, where chief Yé and his notables had hanged themselves. The layout is cramped, showing the need to use every available space.

We can attempt an evaluation of the population density by using the women's huts only. They had a diameter of 3.50 to 3.80 metres, which seems to have been a common size at that time over all of western Adamawa and can be found among the Vuté of Banyo as well as the Mambila of the plateau. The average distance between the centres of the huts was 5 to 6m. On this basis, the habitat areas could number 3.0 huts per 100 square metres, corresponding to six people at the rate of two people per hut (one adult and one child). According to local traditions there were no gardens. Grain was stored in the roofs of the huts but most of the crops were stored in the fields. If we accept that fifteen per cent of the surface area could have been taken up by supporting walls, pathways, cult areas, and probably some areas in dispute, the population could have reached 5.1 persons per hectare of overall surface, i.e. 2,000 people for a total surface area of 3.92 hectares. I estimate that there was a population of around 4,200 within the fortified site of Mbamban. It is therefore possible that the population decreased slightly following the first raids by the Banyo troops or because of epidemics.

The fortified sites of Atta

It seems that at the time of the struggles against the FulBe, all the Sonkolong population gathered at Ndégétwom. At the same time the Atta population was distributed over three defensive sites (see Map 1) with a total surface area of 8.5 hectares. One of these, at the summit of the Tor Gar mountain was very narrow, the other two less so. By referring to the settlement patterns of the extreme north of Cameroon (among the 'Kirdi') we can find a likely figure for the population density. If we accept that the areas without buildings could have occupied fifteen per cent of this site, the population could have been $7.2 \times 300 = 2,160$. This size of population would have been similar to that of Sonkolong.

REFERENCE

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