Constructing the Kwanja of Adamawa (Cameroon)
Essay in Fractal Anthropology
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ORTHOGRAHY AND CONVENTIONS

The Kwanja terms used in this book will be written in the Sundane dialect using the following conventions (based on the work of Joan and Martin Weber):

Vowels:
i like in tree
y like in yes
e like in tray (closer to the french "eà" like in "mangeå")
ε like in bed
ø like in cut
u like in two
o like in potato
œ like in taught
û high front rounded vowel, between u and i
i high central unrounded vowel, between i and ε

Consonants are generally pronounced as in English. Note, however:
η like in singer
c like in charm
j like in leisure
g like in game

Kwanja is a tonal language distinguishing between:
´ high tone
` low tone
^ falling tone
^ rising tone

A list of Kwanja concepts mentioned in this book can be found in appendix, as well as a list of the names of persons (chiefs), groups and places. Note, however, that the writing of names, groups and places will be simplified in the book; the Latin alphabet will be used to facilitate reading.
INTRODUCTION

This book is about the Kwanja of Cameroon – who they are, how they are organised, and how they came to be the way they are. It describes how their society is constructed, both socially, through everyday interactions determined by norms, values and personal choices, and cognitively, through a specific worldview and an understanding of the self in relationship to others. It also discusses how I became aware of the complex social construction that I found in the field and how I came to reconstruct it in the present manuscript. This focus on construction will lead me to make extensive use of building metaphors to talk about society, and to place a great deal of emphasis on identifying building materials, building rules, building structures and builders.

The first chapter will start by discussing the impact that the Fulbe have had on the way the Kwanja live today, both from a historical perspective (including the slave trade initiated by the Fulbe, which decimated the Kwanja), and in relation to the complex relationships of power that still link these two groups today. I will then go on to a discussion of the kinship system, which constitutes one of the most important cements of social life. Chapters three and four will focus on the cultural and religious diversity found among the Kwanja. It will be shown that the Kwanja are an aggregate of groups with very different historical origins, but nevertheless sharing a common set of political and ritual structures. I will then move on to analyse the Kwanja worldview by looking at how the social and natural orders are defined and maintained. Chapter six will focus on the moral economy of the Kwanja and on some of the fundamental micro-political rules governing everyday life. I will end with a discussion about how the Kwanja use commonalities and differences with their neighbours in order to construct their social identities.

Throughout the book, the analysis will move back and forth between the Kwanja as a whole, the different groups within the Kwanja and the Kwanja’s neighbours, balancing between similarities and differences, between homogeneity and diversity. Although the “Kwanja” number only around 10,000 people, they display an
astonishing cultural diversity: one can distinguish at least nine different groups speaking different languages, with a great variety of rituals and claiming widely different geographical origins. In fact, the differences are so great among the different Kwanja groups that one might question the legitimacy of calling them all “Kwanja” and thus implying some (imagined) homogeneity. However, I will argue that, beyond this formal diversity, one nevertheless finds kinship, ritual and political structures that are common to all of these groups, some of which are also shared with the Kwanja’s neighbours.

Clearly, such a description of the Kwanja is basically my construction of their constructions, and one can legitimately ask what legitimacy I have in doing so or how close my representation is to reality (Marcus and Cushman 1982; Clifford 1986; Marcus and Fisher 1986; Pool 1991; Rosenau 1992: 21). My construction is made from a certain perspective. I worked much more with men than with women, something reflected in the views presented in this book. I did not become fluent in any Kwanja dialects and relied mainly on French or on the help of interpreters in speaking to informants. My own education in the French anthropological tradition led me to place a greater emphasis on structures and world-views than on praxis, social organisation and agency. Yet, like all ethnographers, I claim authority and legitimacy on the basis of my own first-hand experience. Living for almost two years among the Kwanja forced me to learn and interiorise local rules in order to be accepted by others and to solve the conflicts into which I was drawn. I will use memorable episodes from my fieldwork and describe some of the events that made me learn new rules and adjust my behaviour in order to show how I gradually became socialised into Kwanja society and how I came to construct the Kwanja the way I did.

A construction needs building materials as well as rules or structures and builders to assemble them. Identifying the builders of Kwanja society is difficult, as it has been elaborated by the daily interactions of thousands of people in the course of time. However, some have been more instrumental than others, and I will provide examples of actors who have been influential in redefining the

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1 In a society in which most activities are gender-specific, it is difficult to bridge this divide or to interview a woman alone without raising suspicions of a sexual relationship being involved.
Kwanja in a certain way. For example, Kwanja identity has recently witnessed a strong revival, after its educated “elites” worked hard to unite all the different villages of the Kwanja region into one development association. The translation of the Bible into one of the Kwanja languages has furthermore added to the pride of the community and to a new sense of homogeneity. Some institutions, such as the Sultan of Banyo and his administration, have also been instrumental in (re-)shaping Kwanja society and identity. These examples will show that the construct is not immutable, but dynamic and changing.

Studying the Kwanja as a construct while working within the structuralist tradition allowed me to try and identify the smallest meaningful units constituting the social fabric, as well as the rules determining how legitimately to use this material according to the context. One of the dangers of talking about structure is to adopt a strictly deterministic position that leaves place for neither individual choice nor change. I will nevertheless argue throughout this book that the existence of deterministic rules or structures does not preclude change or indeterminacy. In fact, it is the very co-existence of different competing deterministic rules that creates the unpredictability of individual and collective action, although the outcome will always remain familiar, since people are obeying the same set of rules. When different explanatory systems compete to give meaning to misfortune and to deal with it (Chapter 5) and when the exchange of services derives from the concurrent interplay between four different types of obligation (Chapter 6), the choices made in a given context cannot be predicted in advance, although the outcome remains within a range of expected possible actions. Likewise, lineages (Chapter 2), historical narratives (Chapter 3) and ethnic groups (Chapter 7) are constructed in accordance with sets of competing rules that can account for both their homogeneity and their diversity.

Another recurring argument running through the book is that the complexity found at higher scales of social interaction often reflects the structure found at lower scales. For example, I will argue that large-scale rituals happening once a decade and involving thousands of people represent a scaling-up of smaller rituals that occur on a weekly basis and involve a few people (Chapter 4). Likewise, I will
argue that large-scale ethnic cleansing between the Fulbe and local populations has the same structure as small-scale agro-pastoral conflicts (Chapter 1), and that large-scale alliances between Kwanja groups or their neighbours are constructed in accordance with the same structures as alliances struck between individuals or lineages (Chapter 2). In Chapter 7, I will show that major ethnic identities have the same structure as any collective identity found at a higher or lower level.

These two lines of argument are inspired by chaos fractal theory. First, mathematicians and physicists have shown that there can be order in apparent chaos, and that simple mechanistic and deterministic equations can produce what look like randomness and unpredictability (Gleick 1988: 79). Chaotic systems are characterized by an extreme sensitivity to initial conditions, small differences being susceptible of having major and unpredictable consequences. And yet, despite the unpredictability, nonlinearity and non-periodicity of chaotic systems, they are also characterized by long-term regular patterns of alternation and oscillation (ibid.: 122-53). Although these systems never repeat themselves and never take a path that has already been taken, they nevertheless look familiar, as the paths taken have structures that are similar to previous ones. This line of thought can be found in my argument. The constructions or perceptions of conflicts, lineages, narratives, misfortune, rituals, exchanges or collective identities produce very different outcomes, although they all stem from the application of the same sets of deterministic rules.

Secondly, fractals are mathematical objects that are characterized by a self-similar structure, that is, a structure that is reproduced regardless of the scale of magnification or “minification” used when analysing them. A fractal can be created by taking an initial object to which is applied a transformation, or rule, which is repeated in a recursive (iterative) manner, ad infinitum. The object created is thus built around a structure that remains self-similar, regardless of the scale or perspective that one adopts to look at it. While the measure of an object changes according to the scale
adopted, the ratio between elements on one scale remains similar to the relations between elements on other scales. Whether seen close up or from afar, from a local or global perspective the structure remains the same, regardless of the different forms that it takes on different scales. Thus, just as large earthquakes are a scaled-up version of a smaller ones, so major Kwanja rituals or major ethnic conflicts with the Fulbe are scaled-up versions of smaller ones, all occurrences sharing the same fractal structure.

Such mathematical approaches, when applied to anthropology, have the potential to build a bridge between the old dichotomies opposing determinism and unpredictability, structure and agency, as well as local and global processes (see also Mosko 2005). As already mentioned, construction needs building material, construction rules and builders – all of which need to be thoroughly described in order for us to understand how societies are constructed. This book is an attempt to use the Kwanja as a case study and to provide an example of how this might be done.

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2 The length of the coast of Denmark, for example, or of the border between Belgium and the Netherlands, will differ according to the scale chosen (see Gleick 1988: 95).
CHAPTER 1

KWANJA-FULBE CONFLICTS

The Kwanja live in Adamawa, Cameroon (Fig. 1 and 2) and anyone living in this region cannot help being struck by the presence and dominance of the Fulbe. The Fulbe arrived in the region during the first half of the nineteenth century and initiated slave raids on a large scale, which decimated the Kwanja and many other local communities. Today, they dominate the region politically through a number of Sultanates to which people owe allegiance and services. They dominate it economically through their control of the flourishing cattle industry and of trade and transport. Finally they also dominate Adamawa religiously and culturally, as Islam is present everywhere (and is controlled by the Fulbe) and as Fulfulde is the regional lingua franca. One cannot study the Kwanja without understanding their historical and political relations with the Fulbe, as the old wounds are still unhealed and the Kwanja constantly talk about their problems with the Fulbe. Their situation is not unique, however, as positioning vis-à-vis the Fulbe is very important for other local populations of Adamawa.3 Likewise, one cannot talk about the Fulbe in Adamawa without describing their relations with the local populations that lived in the region prior to their arrival at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Although the history of the region is often simplified and presented in terms of an opposition between the Fulbe and local populations in school books and both Fulbe and local narratives, it is in reality much more complex.

3 Finding a neutral generic term for local populations in order to distinguish them from the Fulbe is not an easy task. Calling them Macube (slave or pagan), Kirdi (mountain-dweller) means using derogatory Fulfulde terms. “Non-Fulbe” is more neutral but still Fulbe-centric. I prefer the term “local populations”, even though I do not mean by this that the Fulbe are “not local” (I do not question the fact that most Fulbe living in Cameroon, including the first president of the country, are and were legitimate Cameroonian citizens). Moreover, by “local” I do not mean that such populations lived in isolation of one another. On the contrary, they were linked by wide networks of trade (Warnier 1985). The term “local” refers, rather, to their presence in Adamawa prior to the arrival of the Fulbe.
Chapter 1: Kwanja - Fulbe conflicts

Fig. 1: Map of Cameroon

Fig. 2: Map of the Kwanja region
- Limit between the plain and the plateau (above 1000 m.)
The conquest of Adamawa

Generally speaking, the cohabitation of Fulbe and Fulbe-ized people with the local populations, both in the towns and in rural areas, is non-violent, but characterized by serious tensions. In rural areas, one finds primarily local communities living more or less within the limits of the customary land that they controlled before the arrival of the Fulbe. Although many have moved around due to past migrations or slave raids, they continue to exert some form of political and religious control over their ancestral land. Some areas, however, passed under Fulbe control when the communities that used to live on them were either wiped out by slave raids, or integrated into the Fulbe community, as is the case for the Bute territory around Banyo. The population in the towns consists mainly of Fulbe and Fulbe-ized people, as well as migrant traders, administrators, specialized workers or local villagers.

All Cameroonian history books and most people in Cameroon state that the greater Adamawa (corresponding roughly to northern Cameroon) was conquered by the Fulbe waging a *jihad* or religious war at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In southern and western Cameroon, the north is usually described as a region mainly peopled by Fulbe under the leadership of Fulbe sultans and as almost uniformly Muslim. When local populations are taken into consideration, it is in terms of a dichotomy that dates back to colonial times, when the Fulbe were described as “natural-born rulers” and “conquerors” who brought history, civilisation (Islam), urbanisation, trade and global links to a variety of disorganised, tribal, stateless, pagan, backward and isolated rural local communities (Salamone 1975). These dichotomies between historical/a-historical, organised/disorganised, Muslim/Pagan, urban/rural, global/local and civilised/backward societies not only derive from the Fulbe’s Manichean self-definition (see below), they have also been reinforced by the fact that, while historians have concentrated

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4 “Fulbe-ized” people have a local patrilineal origin, but present themselves as Fulbe (although this identity is sometimes contested by both the Fulbe and the local communities). They are also called “detribalised” (Hurault 1964; 1970) and are either descended from former slaves or became Fulbe-ized when they migrated to the towns and/or converted to Islam.
their studies on Fulbe states, anthropologists have focused on local communities (Sharpe 1986).

The reality, of course, is very different from these clichés. The dichotomies are artificial, and the interconnections between the different groups run so deep that one cannot study one in isolation of the other. One must deconstruct clichés simplifying the history and sociology of Adamawa in order to reconstruct a model that can account for the social and historical complexities of the region. True, Adamawa was conquered. The conquest was initiated by the Fulbe, and it did create sweeping and long-lasting changes throughout northern Cameroon within a relatively short period of time. However, spreading the Koran was used as a religious excuse to wage a war that was political and economic in nature. Moreover, the Fulbe could not have conquered Adamawa without making military alliances with some local populations. These populations fought freely alongside the Fulbe (sometimes against other Fulbe sultanates) and benefitted from slave raids and trade. Finally, the definition of identity is complex and cannot be reduced to a model of the “free Fulbe” versus the “slave non-Fulbe”. Apart from the differences of status within both the Fulbe and local populations, one should not forget the categories that exist in between, such as the half-caste sultan and his culturally uprooted local dignitaries. This institution, situated at the intersection between Fulbe and non-Fulbe communities, quickly gained relative independence from both the Fulbe and the local communities, and developed its own instruments of power to defend its specific interests.

A religious war?

The conquest of Adamawa is often presented as part of a *jihad* initiated by Uthman Dan Fodio in Sokoto in 1803, who quickly asserted his authority over a large area, after quite unexpectedly defeating several Hausa kingdoms (Hiskett 1973; Johnston 1967; Last 1974; Smith 1966). The term *jihad* should, however, be used with caution. In Nigeria, it should rather be described as religious revivalism, since the defeated Hausa kingdoms were officially Muslim, while many Fulbe soldiers supporting Uthman Dan Fodio had not yet
The conquest of Adamawa

converted to Islam (Smith 1966: 412; 417-8; Last 1974: 9). One could argue that the only true jihad of the Sokoto empire took place in Adamawa, since most of Adamawa populations were “pagan” at that time. Indeed, the Fulbe from Adamawa who visited Adama of Gurim (the person chosen by Uthman Dan Fodio for this task) were given special flags to wage a jihad and spread Islam in Adamawa (Mohammadou 1965; 1978; Njeuma 1981; Lacroix 1952). However, this “jihad” must be critically reviewed in light of the fact that, until 1950, most local populations had not yet converted to Islam and were even actively prevented from doing so. There are several possible reasons for this.

First, some parts of Adamawa were densely populated (Hurault 1975a; 1986; 1988) and the Fulbe, despite their military superiority based on cavalry (Bah 1982 and 1993), were not numerous enough to conquer Adamawa alone. They were therefore forced to create alliances with some of the local populations in order to subdue others, and they played cleverly on local rivalries to achieve this (Hurault 1975a: 425; Mohammadou 1966: 255; 269). On the one hand, it is probable that the allies (such as the Wawa) had to be carefully handled, and that care was taken not to upset them by forcing them to convert against their will. On the other hand, the enemies (such as the Kwanja) were raided mercilessly for slaves, which constituted the backbone of the economy of the new sultanates. Even after they had been subdued, conquered communities still had to provide a quota of slaves each year. Since it is, under Islam, forbidden to enslave a fellow Muslim (Bah 1993: 82; Mohammadou 1966: 270; Willis 1985), allowing the conquered people to convert to Islam would have ended the slave trade (Büttner 1967; Froelich 1966: 165; Hurault 1975a: 428; Levtzion 1985: 192). Add to this the fact that different sultanates fought one another in order to control the biggest territory, and therefore as many slaves and pastures as possible (Adeleye 1974; Mohammadou 1988: 21; Smith 1966: 423), it is clear that the main drive behind the conquest of Adamawa was not religious, but economic and political.

Secondly, Islam was brought to Adawama by the Fulbe, and it became so closely associated with this group that converting to Islam meant engaging in a process of Fulbe-ization (Burnham 1996: 48; Schultz 1980b: 144). In short, Fulbe identity was associated
with a superior position in the social and political hierarchy, a superiority reinforced by the association of Fulbe identity with Islam. Converting to Islam and becoming Fulbe were thus seen as a strategy to move upward (Gausset 1999; 2002b; 2003). Preventing people from converting to Islam and to Fulbe-ize became a Fulbe strategy to maintain “ethnic” boundaries as well as power and religious hierarchies. The only local people who were allowed to (or rather “forced to”) convert, although they were still prevented from going very far in their religious studies, were the “slaves” working in the palace, who enjoyed a certain amount of prestige and power over both local and Fulbe populations. Any other local people who tried to learn about Islam, as well as the Fulbe who taught them, were beaten or jailed as soon as they were discovered. Similarly, the local people who started herding cattle (another characteristic of Fulbe identity and economic superiority) had to hide or run the risk of seeing their herds seized by the Sultan. It was only on the eve of Cameroon independence that the first local villagers’ conversions were recognised by the sultan, and that local communities were allowed to keep cattle.

Thus, although the arrival of Fulbe in Adamawa is presented as a jihad aimed at spreading Islam, the reality was more complex. The prime motives were political and economic, and local populations were either allowed to keep their faith as important allies, or prevented from converting to Islam both to fuel the slave trade and the flow of servants to the palace, and to maintain the boundaries and hierarchy between the Fulbe and local communities.

**Peaceful arrival and alliances**

The Sultanate of Banyo is situated at the southern limit of the Fulbe expansion in Adamawa. It was founded around 1830 by Haman Dandi (also called Haman Gabdo), who was given a “jihad flag” by Adama of Gurim and who had already established the Sultanate of Koncha, north of Banyo (Kirk-Greene 1958: 133; Lacroix 1952: 28;

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5 The flag is still carefully preserved in the palace and is proudly seen as legitimating the prominence of Banyo over some other sultanate which does not have any such flag, such as the neighbouring and competing Tibati.
Mohammadou 1964: 47). Although several scholars depict the foundation of Banyo as the result of a fierce battle and conquest (Kirk-Greene 1958: 133; Lacroix 1952: 28), local narratives describe the arrival of the Fulbe in Banyo in peaceful and friendly terms leading to an alliance with a few local communities. Some informants say that the initiative was taken locally, as the Fulbe were invited by the Wawa and some Bute to help them fight against other Bute communities, while others say that it was the Fulbe who took the initiative to explore the region and make an alliance with the first local populations they met. But all accounts agree that the first encounter was peaceful. In the words of Alhadji Ndoutoua Mboutsam Boutong, one of the most respected griots (local historians and praise singers) of the Sultan:

The Wawa and the Bute heard that some people had arrived in Koncha with a lot of meat, and they asked them to come to Banyo. The Fulbe came with some cattle and seven horses. They killed the cattle, distributed the meat, and said that if the Wawa and the Bute wanted more, they had to dig a path in the mountain so that the cows and horses could come safely, without breaking their legs. The Wawa and the Bute prepared the road. When the Fulbe of Haman Gabdo came, they did not fight. They slaughtered cattle, cooked the meat, and distributed it to the people. This was a trick to persuade the local people to co-operate with the Fulbe and raid their neighbours. At that time, the Fulbe were very kind. When an old man died, they came to the funeral with a lot of presents. They flattered people. They asked girls to marry, and the local people accepted, because they received a lot of gifts from them. When the girls gave birth, the children were sent to their families to ask for help in order to raid the Mambila and the Niem-Niem.

As we shall see in Chapter 2, the episode about slaughtering cattle fits well with the archetype of the chief as a generous “hunter”, or meat provider. This historical account also challenges the widespread cliché that all the local girls who ended up in a Fulbe household were taken by force. If it is true that the exchange of women has been one-sided, with the Fulbe taking local girls but refusing to let Fulbe women marry local men, several reasons might be advanced. There is the issue of religion, since Muslim girls are

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6 The Bamoun king Njoya adopted the same strategy and asked the Sultan of Banyo for help to get rid of his political opponents.
not allowed to marry non-Muslim men. Then there is the issue of brideprice. Traditionally, the brideprice found in local populations is extremely low – some palm-wine, cola nuts and a few iron shovels. The brideprice required by the Fulbe is comparatively very high – a few head of cattle. As a result, many local parents were quite happy to let their daughters marry a Fulbe man and receive much more brideprice than they would receive from a local son-in-law. Finally, it should be noted that, given the strong local emphasis on matrilineal kinship and the strong Fulbe emphasis on patrilineality, the offspring of mixed unions were important mediators in the relationships between Fulbe and local populations.

One should be cautious in taking the signs of inequality between local populations and the Fulbe and the allegiance of local populations to the Sultan as proof that the arrival of the Fulbe was imposed by force and conquest. Most Wawa informants I spoke to insisted on the peaceful arrival of the first Fulbe in Banyo and on their alliance with the Wawa and some Bute (see also Mohamadou 1978: 172). This was confirmed by the late Sultan himself and by a local anonymous historical document kept in the Sultanate. Although a historical document written in Arabic by a Fulbe in 1908 presents the arrival of Haman Gabdo in Banyo in terms of a military conquest, it also says that Hamman Gabdo went to Banyo at the request of a local chief with whom he made an alliance (Adama and Bah 2001: 37-8).

Different types of Fulbe and non-Fulbe communities

The local communities who engaged in political and matrimonial alliances with the Fulbe soon followed them in slave raids against neighbouring communities. One must thus distinguish those local communities who were the allies of the Fulbe from those who refused to submit and were raided violently. For their part, the Fulbe should not be considered a homogenous group either, as different groups fought against one another (together with their respective allies) in order to increase their power. Consider the following account from an informant:
The first Fulbe to arrive in Banyo was Haman Gabdo, who came from Koncha. He left his son Oussoumanou in Banyo and went to live in Gashaka with another son called Sambo. Sambo was not happy with the small number of cattle in Gashaka, and he attacked his brother Oussoumanou while he was touring his sultanate in the countryside. Haman Gabdo scolded Sambo for attacking his brother, but he was old and sick, and he died soon afterwards in Gashaka, leaving the two brothers continuing to fight. While Oussoumanou was besieging Gashaka, his Kaimama Kembam (one of the most important dignitaries of the sultanate), whose name was Wam, dug a fortified trench around Banyo and seized power. He slaughtered many cattle and chicken and distributed them to the Fulbe and Bute in order to gain their political support. When Oussoumanou came back from Gashaka, Kembam did not allow him to enter the newly fortified town. There was war. Oussoumanou had a weak daughter who lived in Koncha and had married a Fulbe from the Janti clan, to whom Oussoumanou had given many slaves. When his daughter heard that he had been dethroned by one of his local dignitaries, she sent him one hundred Kutin slaves. Without them, Oussoumanou would never have been able to retake Banyo, as everybody was supporting Kembam. His people let him escape, and the Bute Mba even followed him. The Bute who live today in Banyo are not originally from here but come from Tibati. The Fulbe were not many; it was the slaves who gave them strength.

QG: When Kembam rebelled against Oussoumanou, who did the Wawa and Kwanja support?
The Wawa followed the Fulbe in everything. Sihuto, the chief of Gandwa (a Wawa village), made an alliance with the Fulbe and fought so fiercely that he made the Wawa famous. The Kwanja were afraid of the Fulbe and ran away as soon as they approached. The Fulbe took their children at will.

These historical narratives provide a number of important pieces of information. First, the Fulbe fought among each others in fratricidal wars. Secondly, the narratives stress the difference between those local communities that were the allies of the Fulbe (Wawa, some Bute) and those that opposed them, such as the Kwanja and the Mambila, who fought fiercely and even succeeded in killing Sultan Oussoumanou. Thirdly, the Fulbe were few and quite weak without the help of the local people, whether “slaves” (Kutin, Kwanja) or allies (Wawa, Bute). The strength of the Fulbe came not just from their military prowess, but also from their aptitude in creating alliances and playing on local rivalries between different local groups. The local populations were not passive subjects
but active actors, not only as allies of the Fulbe, but also as possible competitors capable of rebelling against the Sultan and overthrowing him. All these pieces of information challenge the widespread view that the conquest of Adamawa was the result of Fulbe superiority over weak and passive local populations.

_Slaves and servants; captives and tribute_

Nobody doubts that there were many violent slave raids that fuelled an important slave trade over long distances. What must be questioned, however, is who played what role, and for how long. Several distinctions must be made. First, one must distinguish between _slaves_ who could be sold and exported on large distances from _domestic servants_ who remained in the region and were able to maintain some contact with their original communities. Then one can also distinguish between the _captives_ who were raided and seized by force and those who were given _as tribute_ by their own parents, either of their own free will or because they were legitimately compelled to do so. Generally speaking, most slaves were captives, while most people given as tribute were servants.\(^7\) The captives could be either sold or retained as servants, while young people given as tribute could not be sold and would usually serve in the palace. Servants could also become the Sultan’s concubines or dignitaries, thus acquiring important political influence.

Although one often hears that “the local populations used to be the slaves of the Fulbe”, one should not forget first, that the local allies of the Fulbe were not raided, and secondly, that they also acquired slaves when they took parts in raids. According to Wawa informants, the warriors who captured slaves were given one third of the catch, the rest going to the Sultan and his dignitaries. The slaves of non-Fulbe raiders were either sold or became so well integrated into the local communities that it is very difficult today to know who is descended from slaves.

\(^7\) There were some exceptions, though. For example, when Bankim was besieged by the army of the Sultan, it bought peace by paying a tribute of 100 person whom, although they were not captives as such, were nevertheless seen as slaves (Gausset 1997b: 433).
As the first slaves were all captured in war, and as those local communities that resisted were sooner or later either destroyed or integrated as subjects into the Sultanate, the ability to acquire new slaves dried up. As soon as they became subjects, however, local villages would have to give an annual tribute of one or two young people to the Sultan, plus a proportion of what they produced (grain, iron, oil-palm, salt, etc.). The Sultan of Banyo would then give annually 100 slaves to the Emir of Yola (Gausset 1997b: 41), who would receive 5000 in total and send 2000 on to Sokoto (Fisher 2001). The obligation to give servants to the Sultan reinforced matrilineal and bilateral kinship ties (or marriage in uxorem, as opposed to marriage in genetricem), as a man would rather send his sister’s or daughter’s child than his own. The abolition of the slave trade in 1900 ended slave raids, but it allowed the giving of children as tribute to continue.

It is often thought that the colonial administration weakened the power of the sultans, as they forced them to submit. However, it has also been argued that their power was actually reinforced by the system of indirect rule through which the Germans and the French administered northern Cameroon, using the existing Fulbe administra-
tive structure in order to save money (Burnham 1996: 34; Lacroix 1952: 57; Sharpe 1986). Indirect rule made the sultans less dependent on their traditional local allies. Although the raids officially ceased, the sultans were placed in charge of collecting taxes, and sometimes engaged in “raid-like” expeditions under the pretence of punishing those who refused to pay them – as well as those who refused to pay the customary tribute. Moreover, the colonial administration turned a blind eye to “domestic slavery” (serfdom), which continued to exist until the 1950s. In fact, the colonial administration had no interest in ending domestic slavery, since this was likely to be resisted by its Fulbe allies and since administrators benefited directly from it, needing “forced labourers” to transport goods, work on infrastructure (roads, administrative buildings), work in the tin mines of Mayo Darle or work in the military. Sultans were required to provide forced labour, as well as pupils for the first schools, and would usually send their own servants or members of local communities. Local communities paid a high price for the “development” of Banyo, but they also benefited from being the first to acquire access to education. Forced labour decreased as the colonial administration became less coercive. Domestic slavery was abolished in the 1950s, after coming under increased criticism from a number of influential actors, including Catholic priests (Oswald 1994).

The fact that local populations gave servants to the Sultan should not be taken as proof that the local populations were, collectively, the “slaves of the Sultan” (and even less the “slaves of the Fulbe”). First, it is a customary obligation among the local communities to provide the chief with goods, services, wives, and even servants. A chief is not supposed to work, but should rather be fed and provided with food, wealth and wives by his people. Secondly, all the subjects of the Sultan, including the Fulbe, had to give him tribute. In Adamawa, the jakka (the charity to the poor that constitutes one of the five pillars of Islam) is not given directly to the poor but rather to the Sultan, who is supposed to redistribute it himself. In practice, it has become a kind of mandatory tax or tribute. Moreover, each pastoralist migrating to Banyo to graze his cattle has to ask the permission of the Sultan and to offer him one or several head of cattle (depending on the size of his herd). Those who refuse are expelled manu militari out of Banyo by the Sultan’s pri-
vate army, which creates tensions with the national administration when the herders appeal to the civil courts. In economic terms, the contribution (taxes, tributes, “gifts”) of the Fulbe communities has always been very important – probably more important than the contribution of services and servants by the local communities. If there is no doubt that a son or daughter are of inestimable value to their parents, we must not forget that a head of cattle used to be much more valuable than a human being in the heydays of the slave trade. Heinrich Barth, for example, reports that a slave could be sold for a goat or some baskets of millet (Barth 1860: 248). This leads us to challenge the general assumption that the local communities were the victims of the Fulbe, as it is more accurate to say that both Fulbe and non-Fulbe were the “victims” of the Sultan, and that both paid a high tribute.

Fig. 4: Some of the “slave” women serving in the palace, wearing the new clothes they received for the end of the Ramadan

As long as the Sultan is recognised as the legitimate leader, the girls he marries without paying bridewealth and the annual tribute or customary taxes he receives, whether from the local or the
Fulbe communities, cannot be interpreted as slavery, but must be seen as acts of political allegiance. However, as soon as a community ceases to recognise the legitimacy of the Sultan (such as the Kwanja villages, who have always challenged his authority, or nomadic Fulbe entering the Sultanate without asking his permission), it can no longer be seen as a customary tribute but rather as a forced exaction. The crucial difference is a question of political recognition and legitimacy. When a new Sultan is nominated to the throne, for example, those local communities that were the allies of the Fulbe (mainly Wawa and Bute) voluntarily give him a young girl in the hope that their daughter will give birth to the next Sultan, thus providing implicit acceptance of and legitimacy to the existing power structure, and hoping to derive a personal or collective benefit from it. But former enemies (such as the Kwanja communities) seldom give anything, as all past tributes were based on coercion rather than allegiance.

A last point that needs to be emphasised is that Fulbe identity is defined with reference to the *pulaaku*, a moral code of conduct and values which is based on race,\(^8\) good manners, bodily and emotional control, Islam, pastoralism and nomadism\(^9\) (Bierschenk 1992; Burnham 1996: 53, 106; Dupire 1981: 170; Kirk-Greene 1986: 41-42; Riesman 1974; Schultz 1980a, 1980b; Vereecke 1994: 30). The *pulaaku* has fuelled an ideology of distinctiveness and superiority, ranking the Fulbe above all other groups. The Fulbe use it to define themselves as free men, not only because they cannot be sold as slaves, but also because ideally they practice a free, nomadic life, are free from superstition, and put great emphasis on controlling (i.e. freeing themselves from) bodily contingencies and emotions (Riesman 1974: 128, 138; Vereecke 1994: 30; Willis 1985:

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\(^8\) Despite many intermarriages with local women, the Fulbe tend to define themselves as “white-skinned”, as opposed to the “black-skinned” local populations (Burnham 1972; Dupire 1981: 168).

\(^9\) Most Fulbe are sedentary, but some remain nomadic or semi-nomadic (they are also locally called Mbororo). Each kind of Fulbe claims to be “more Fulbe” than the other group (Botte and Schmitz 1994: 9; Burnham 1991: 92-3; Schultz 1980a). Sedentary Fulbe see themselves as superior because they are supposedly better Muslims (a nomadic way of life is often seen as incompatible with the orthodox practice of Islam). Nomadic groups, on the other hand, define themselves as the “true Fulbe” because they continue to live an idealised pastoral life.
By contrast, local communities are seen as slaves, not only because they used to be captured and sold, but also because they are attached to their territory, are caught up in a web of “superstition”, and are enslaved to their emotions and bodily needs. This partly explains why, long after the slave trade has been abolished, the Fulbe continue to consider any local population, especially non-Muslim, as “slave”.

Thus, the widespread statement that the local communities used to be “the slaves of the Fulbe” must be seriously challenged. First, the Fulbe were not the only ones to benefit from the slave trade: their local allies, who constituted the bulk of the sultan’s army, also took a share of the catch. Secondly, one must distinguish the slaves, who were usually captured and could be sold, from the domestic servants, who would usually not be sold. Thirdly, the tribute of servants was not given to “the Fulbe”, but rather to the Sultan and his dignitaries. Fourthly, the Fulbe communities also had to give an annual tribute, which surpassed, in monetary terms, the local tribute. Finally, one must realise that the Fulbe define themselves as “free” and in opposition to local communities who are thereby automatically defined as “not free”, although this does not necessarily refer to rights in persons.

**The palace (the Sultan and his dignitaries)**

The main actors of domination and exploitation in Banyo are not “the Fulbe” as a group, but rather the Sultan and his dignitaries – what I call “the palace”. When he arrived in Banyo around 1830, Haman Gabdo, the first Sultan, depended closely on the good will of his local allies – to such an extent that he was almost overthrown by some of them. He succeeded, however, in gaining progressively more independence from local communities, as he increasingly built his power on a pool of slaves and servants who owed him allegiance. In the words of Jean Hurault (1975a: 434-5, my translation):

> Just a few in numbers, and above all preoccupied by their cattle and their personal slaves, the Fulbe could only constitute the framework of a permanent military force, essentially the cavalry. The conquest of the country had as its initial instrument a numerous infantry recruited from among the captives. It seems that quite early the Lamido gave the com-
mand of his troops to servants’ dignitaries, and even created a cavalry corps entirely recruited among captives…. The hope of receiving a title and of escaping, if not in status, at least the ordinary fate of the slave, created an emulation among the captives which incited them to fight with courage. Their exploits were rewarded with gift of slaves, concubines and horses, as well as honorific titles.

The slaves and servants were not only the backbone of the sultan’s economy and power, they were also able to gain advantages from their position and to enrich themselves through fighting, or to become powerful dignitaries. They were thus able to acquire important influence over the Sultan (Lacroix 1952: 37-8). Having no Fulbe father kept them out of the competition over the succession to the throne and made them generally more loyal to the Sultan than the Fulbe dignitaries. However, their loyalty was built on reciprocity. The dignitaries were loyal to the Sultan only in so far as he was loyal to them and furthered their interests. A French colonial administrators in Banyo describes palace intrigues as follow:

The new sultan is, at least at the beginning, in a state of relatively strong dependence vis-à-vis his electoral committee. He will thus be subject to their influence and follow their suggestions. It happens, moreover, that, once nominated with a few means compared to the expenses he is expected to face, he needs the complicity of the big dignitaries so that the abuses of power, exactions, pillages, or thefts to which he is compelled in his first years are not too great. After some years exercising power he believes he is strong enough not to take into account the pressure that his committee continues to exert on him. The influence of the committee being compromised, the dignitaries plan the accession of a new sultan. (cited in Hurault 1994: 62, my translation)

As we can see, the “slaves” or servants are not powerless, and to describe them in a relation of submission to their master would neglect the benefits that they derive from their status, as can be deduced from the fact that men and women continue to serve in the palace despite the abolition of domestic slavery (see for exam-
ple fig. 3-5). They may have a strong influence on the Sultan, who is chosen by them and depends on them to keep his throne, despite the increased involvement of the national administration in the nomination of new sultans. It must be stressed here that, although they continue to call themselves Wawa, Kwanja, Tikar or Mambila, these dignitaries have little in common with the local villagers sharing these identities. They have usually been raised in or around the palace from a very young age and have little contact with their relatives in the villages. They speak Bute or Fulfulde and are usually unable to communicate in any other vernacular. They are Muslim, dress like the Fulbe, and will not participate in local rituals. In fact, they can easily (and are often) mistaken as Fulbe by those who visit the palace without knowing its complex history. Some of them even presented themselves as Fulbe to me, although I was told later on that they were of local origin – which they admitted when I asked them specifically. The dignitaries are part of that larger group of “detribalised” people, i.e. of people who have lost their local cultural roots and have Fulbe-ized.

Fig. 5: The Sultan in his courtyard, surrounded by his most important dignitaries (some of whom are of “slave” origin) and his bodyguards, waiting for the crowd of princes and chiefs to come before him and swear allegiance to him.
If the dignitaries are neither totally powerful nor powerless, and neither totally non-Fulbe nor Fulbe but somewhere in between, the same can be said of the Sultan. The rule that only the children of a sultan having a local mother can claim the throne is very important. First, matrimonial alliances have been instrumental in forging political alliances between the Fulbe and the local communities. Secondly, this rule excludes from the succession all the children born of a Fulbe mother, meaning that all sultans have a “slave” or “servant” as a mother, and several servants as close maternal kin. When this rule is repeated over four generations, it also means that only one of the sixteen great-great-grandparents of a sultan is a Fulbe (in the strict patrilineal line, i.e. the original Sultan; see fig. 6), while the fifteen others are of local origin. The sultan is so close to the local communities that I have heard several Kwanja strongly deny that he was Fulbe at all, describing him instead as a mixture of Wawa and Kwanja. If the Sultan is able to claim a Fulbe identity, it is because of his patrilineal inheritance of this identity. The palace and its surroundings constitute a small town within town, with bodyguards, doormen, secretaries, messengers, grooms, cooks, maids, concubines and dignitaries mainly of local extraction. The lingua franca of the palace is Bute, the mother tongue of the Sultans and also one of the lingua franca of Banyo. The Sultan himself emphasises the local origin of his mother when he tours the local communities. I was told that he jokingly calls everybody “grandmother” when he visits a Kwanja village, in order to emphasise his local maternal ties. His close ties with the local populations is seen locally as a guarantee that he will not harm them, while the Sultan regards it as a guarantee that they will remain loyal to him. Thus, instead of being characterised by a relation of dominance and submission, the relations between the Sultan and the local populations should rather be described as ones of mutual dependence. And instead of being seen as “pure” Fulbe, the Sultan must be situated at a crossroads between the Fulbe and the local communities. He defines himself as Fulbe in public or when talking to Fulbe interlocutors, but he speaks Bute and emphasises his local origins on his mother’s side when it suits his interests to do so.
Thus, the palace (the Sultan and his dignitaries) constitutes a kind of “half-caste” institution, whose interest is distinct from both the local and Fulbe communities. Many Kwanja tend to see the palace as illegitimate and biased towards the Fulbe communities from which it now derives most of its economic support. However, the
institution’s survival also depends on the political support it can raise from local communities, and it is therefore bound to keep a delicate balance between the Fulbe and the local populations in order to remain in power. Before independence, this balance was partly maintained by preventing ethnic switching from one identity to another, thus preventing local men from adopting Islam and pastoralism so as to prevent their Fulbe-ization and maintain the majority of the population in a lower status, bound to support the Sultan to gain advantages. After independence, with the new principle of “one man-one vote” and the fact that the Fulbe were a numerical minority in northern Cameroon, Islamisation and Fulbe-ization were encouraged by Fulbe politicians (including President Ahidjo) in order to recruit political supporters (Gausset 2003). However, this process was resisted by the bulk of the Fulbe, who continue to define themselves in opposition to the local populations.

**Agro-pastoral conflicts**

The balance of power between the Fulbe and the local populations is a delicate one. If the Fulbe tend to have the upper hand economically and politically in Adamawa, the local communities still retain the advantages of numbers and of territorial control, which are essential in times of conflict. The situation remains tense between the Fulbe and the local communities (especially those who never accepted an alliance with the Sultan), and violent conflicts erupt once in a while, which often turn out to the advantage of the local communities and to the disadvantage of the Fulbe. For example, when one agro-pastoral conflict degenerated into a full-blown local war in Gashaka (the Nigerian part of the Banyo Sultanate) during my fieldwork in December 2001, thousands of Fulbe and Fulbe-ized people from the Mambila plateau crossed the Cameroonian border within a few days (see fig. 7) to seek refuge in the area of Banyo after their houses were burnt down and dozens of them (and hundreds of their cattle) were killed. Had the military waited another day before intervening, it is believed that the palace of the Sultan in Gashaka would have been attacked and sacked by the Mambila
mob. In what follows I will argue that such large-scale violent conflicts are of the same nature as smaller scale agro-pastoral conflicts.

The Adamawa plateau and the Tikar plain

The war on the Mambila Plateau in 2001 erupted suddenly, but was nevertheless the result of planned events that were widely known. Two weeks before the conflict started, the Sultan of Banyo was telling me of increasing tensions in Gashaka, and Mbororo informants knew that the Fulbe were hiring mercenaries in Nigeria. Nobody was really surprised when these mercenaries attacked a Mambila village two weeks later killing a few villagers, but everybody was surprised by the scale and speed of the Mambila reaction, which cleaned the whole area of most rural Fulbe within a few days. The situation on the Mambila plateau is characterised by a high density of population, and by the fact that the enclosure of large private grazing areas has been pushed to the point where local communities
are facing a shortage of farming land (Boutrais 1995: 1094-8; Hurault 1998), two characteristics which are not found in the Tikar Plain. Moreover, Nigeria is, generally speaking, the object of much more violent “ethnic conflicts” than Cameroon (Dare 1997; Levin 1997; Lovejoy and Williams 1997). That said, many of the problems are the same on the two sides of the boundary, and agro-pastoral conflicts in the Tikar plain have great potential for violence too.

Generally speaking, the conquest of Adamawa stopped at the end of the Adamawa plateau. Although local communities living further south were raided and integrated into the sultanate as subjects of the Sultan, no Fulbe village was established permanently in the plain. Until recently, the only Fulbe in the plain lived in the towns as traders, marabouts or farmers. Pastoralists avoided the plain, which was seen as inhospitable to cattle due to the presence of tse-tse flies and bovine trypanosomiasis. The plateau, on the contrary, having in general an altitude above 1000 meters, was seen as providing relative protection against such disease. After the slave trade was abolished by the German colonial administration, cattle-herding rapidly replaced the slave trade as the main source of wealth in Adamawa, thus preventing the economic and political collapse of the Sultanates (Siran 1980: 55). Pastoralism was encouraged through the introduction of vaccinations by the colonial administration, which benefited from its taxation.

The cattle are usually grazed close to households during the wet season, when it is not difficult to find good grazing areas. However, during the dry season, when grass becomes scarcer, herders may travel great distances to find better opportunities, either coming back to their houses when it starts raining again, or else deciding to establish a new house closer to good pastures. This movement of transhumance and slow migration has pushed increasingly south and east, as the semi-nomadic Fulbe have each year become more daring in their search for new pastures. Forty years ago, the transhumance was reaching the end of the plateau. Then some Fulbe started building houses on the edge of the plateau and, encouraged by improvements in veterinary services and the use of fly repellent for cattle, they began spending the period of transhumance in the Tikar plain, which is a few hundred metres lower in altitude, is wet-
ter and has a lot of grass available. This strategy has proved extremely successful, and has been each year been adopted by an increasing number of herders. The Tikar plain has progressively acquired greater and greater importance for pastoralism in southwestern Adamawa.

Only a tiny minority of Kwanja and Tikar keep small ruminants (mainly goats). They are not used to cattle, although a few own some cattle, which are usually kept by the Fulbe on the plateau. The annual arrival of great numbers of cattle has therefore had profound consequences for both farming practices and the relationship between the Fulbe and the local communities. In particular, it has brought about many agro-pastoral conflicts and increased tensions between the Kwanja and the Fulbe, at least during the dry season. Every year, some cattle damage fields of yams, manioc or dry-season maize, or ruin the coffee harvests. As most Kwanja communities were displaced by the colonial administration to live along the national road, the fields are situated far away from the village. Since without infrastructure it is difficult for people to bring all their harvest back to the village, they keep it in granaries in their fields. Although the granaries are protected by thorny bushes, each year some cattle find a way into some of them and eat up the harvest of entire families, who then face starvation. Each year, some cattle are injured or killed by angry farmers. The destruction of fields, granaries or cattle can degenerate into fights between herders and farmers, and blood is sometimes shed. The opposition and tension between the two communities is widespread and pervades all levels of social interaction, paving the way for possibly large-scale wars between them.

One often reads that agro-pastoral conflicts originate in population growth, the scarcity of resources, or the overexploitation and degradation of resources (Anderson and Woodrow 1998: 248; Bennett 1991; Blench 1994: 208; Cousins 1996: 44-5; Grainger and Tinker 1982: 11, 21, 34; Homer-Dixon 1994; Hussein 1998: 45, 60-61: Jacobson 1988: 12-13; Oxby 1999: 233-4; Spencer 2000: 19-22; Stryker 1989: 91; Tonah 2000: 557). However, this line of argument cannot be applied to explain agro-pastoral conflicts in the Tikar plain, which is still characterised by a low density of population and a relative abundance of resources, making it an area of great
agricultural and pastoral development (Gausset 2005a). Agro-pastoral conflicts should rather be explained by conflicting perceptions of resources and incompatible livelihood strategies, as well as by conflicting ways of defining political legitimacy and the failure of the state to act as a fair arbitrator.

**Farming and herding strategies**

Farming in the plain relies mainly on coffee plantations in forested areas and on maize produced through shifting cultivation. Forested areas are therefore central for farmers. However, with the growth in population and the decrease of nearby forests, savannah regions are increasingly being cultivated for groundnuts and maize. Herders, on their side, depend on the presence of grass and tend to avoid forests if they can (some plants found in forested areas are poisonous to cattle, especially after the forest has been felled and invaded by pioneer species). In short, farmers want more forests and less grass: any grassland is a waste and is liable to come under agriculture. Herders, conversely, want more grass and less forest: any harvested fields or fallow is liable to be used for grazing during transhumance. Farmers’ resources are thus a nuisance for herders, and vice-versa.

Herders’ strategies focus on maximising the mobility of cattle and its access to grass. They light bush fires in different places at different times during the dry season in order to hasten the regeneration of grass and, indirectly, prevent the growth of trees in fallow areas. They graze their cattle in any harvested field or fallow area without asking the permission of farmers. They resent agricultural development in areas that are used for grazing, as well as any change that limits the movement of cattle. Farmers’ strategies, on the other hand, focus on maximising agriculture output and minimising labour input. They therefore try to protect fields against pest (including wandering cattle), and to secure access to forests and fertile soils. Farmers resent the bush fire management of the herders, as this sometimes burns down granaries in the bush (see fig. 8) and thatched houses in villages, or even (though rarely) kills people
trapped by a fire. Farmers resent the fact that herders graze cattle in their fields without asking their permission, as the trampling of cattle might make the soil harder and more difficult to cultivate (Hurault 1975b). However, they tend to create new fields in places where herders have established their camp during transhumance, so as to benefit from the presence of cattle manure. This is resented by the pastoralists, not just because the farmers benefit from their presence without compensating them, but more importantly because it constitutes an invasion of their former grazing areas, which reduces their space and multiplies the risk of field damage when they graze their cattle. As we can see, the strategies of farmers and herders are often directly opposed.

Fig. 8: Three granaries in the bush, two having been burnt down by bush fires and one remaining intact

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11 Farmers do light fires, such as early fires in order to protect their village or granaries from later and more serious fires. They also light fires during the dry season for hunting purposes, but this is usually done further away from agricultural areas. When practising shifting cultivation, they burn the timber felled on cleared fields, but they do this at the end of the dry season and try to contain the fire within the parcel of land. In short, although they do light fires for different reasons, they tend to be better controlled (both collectively and privately) than those lit by herders.
The mobility of cattle is the object of specific struggles. On the one hand, such mobility is crucial for herders in their strategy of optimising access to good pastures (Swift 1977: 462). On the other hand, it is a threat to farmers, as it creates damage in fields and coffee plantations. There exist two types of local solutions to prevent problems. The first consists in keeping an eye on either cattle or fields. There is a broad consensus (generally accepted by the herders as well) that the surveillance of cattle should be undertaken by herders. The problem is that guiding and following the cattle in their daily search for grass is a tough job: one can walk dozens of kilometers per day. The crux of the problem concerns the grazing that takes place very early in the morning. Cattle start grazing around 4 am, at a time when herders are usually asleep, still tired from having followed the cattle during the day, and most damage to fields, plantations and granaries is done during this period of the day. Herders who follow their own herds are better motivated to prevent any agricultural damage, but many herders are hired by rich cattle-owners for a miserable salary and tend to feel less responsible for any damage (Bassett 1994). Some types of arrangement exist, such as the hiring of two herders, one being responsible during the daytime, the other during the early morning grazing. Or else the owner might agree to be responsible for any damage made during the night, while still holding his shepherd responsible for damage done during daytime. However, regardless of how motivated and responsible herders are, they always end up leaving their cattle unattended at some point for a variety of reasons (mistakes, sickness, participation in festivities or rituals, the need to go to the market, etc.). Watching cattle is therefore a strategy that has its limitations.

The second strategy to prevent field damage done by cattle consists in fencing either cattle or fields. However, there is deep disagreement on what should be fenced. Farmers insist that cattle should be fenced, especially in the early morning, when herders are most likely to be asleep and the risk of field damage is at its greatest. Herders resent this, however, as they consider the morning grazing to be an important aspect of the food diet of their cattle (see also Boutrais 1995: 732). Moreover, farmers tend to think that it does not make sense to fence something that is mobile, and that it
makes much more sense to fence fields, since one would not need to move the fence around, and it would not prevent cattle mobility.

Ultimately, the debate about fencing is not so much about what should be fenced, but rather about who should bear the cost of fencing. The farmers do not mind their fields being fenced, as long as the cost is born by the herders. They argue that they have lived in the area since long before the Fulbe started pursuing transhumance in the Tikar plain. They have not asked the Fulbe to come, and think it unfair that they should bear the cost of adapting to the arrival of migrants and cattle in the plain. Herders, however, refuse to bear this cost. They frame the debate in terms of either citizenship (they are Cameroonian citizens and have therefore the same rights as “autochthonous” people) or benefits, arguing that the Cameroonian state derives great benefit from the cattle industry, and that local farmers also benefit from manure, milk, cheap or free meat,12 and from selling their agricultural products to herders (Hussein 1998: 17-20; Swift 1977: 461; Tonah 2000: 552; Waters-Bayer and Bayer 1994: 222-4). They therefore consider it normal that farmers should bear at least part of the cost of their presence in the plain. Farmers contest this view and argue that they do not derive any benefit from the presence of cattle – only problems. They insist that one cannot eat a meal without maize or manioc, although one can eat any meal without meat. Farmers’ sources of meat are primarily fish, game, chicken and goats – not cattle.13 There is almost no integration of cattle into farming in the Tikar plain: cattle are never used for draught power and seldom for manure. Thus, farmers see agriculture as a necessity, herding as a costly luxury.

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12 Herders are Muslims and do not eat the meat of a cattle that has not been ritually slaughtered. When a cow dies of disease or in a road accident, the dead carcass is given to a neighboring local community.

13 A survey of 352 Kwanja households showed that only 4% of Kwanja (mainly on the plateau) own at least one head of cattle, while 9% of men and 2% of women own at least one goat or sheep (usually sold or eaten during religious festivities). In comparison, about 50% of men and 41% of women own some chickens. 43% of men and 57% of women go fishing during the rainy season (about half of them fish at least once per week). 32% of men go hunting with guns (most of them hunt regularly, at least twice per month), and many more use traps to catch game. Thus, the main source of meat is chicken, game and fish. Beef is only bought occasionally.
To sum up, agro-pastoral conflicts are not grounded in resource scarcity, but rather in different environmental perceptions and strategies. What is perceived as a resource for some (fires, grass, forests or fallow) is perceived as a nuisance for others. The strategies developed by a community to secure its own interests (mobility of cattle, shifting cultivation) are opposed to, and compete with, the strategies of the other community. The solutions to avoiding field damage (watching, fencing) are themselves the object of conflicting perceptions and strategies, as there is broad disagreement over what should be watched or fenced, as well as over who should do it and bear the cost. Even the arguments used by each side (social justice for farmers, equal citizenship and cost-benefit analysis for herders) reflect a wide gap between the perceptions and interests of each community.

**Conflict management**

It would be too easy to conclude from the above description that agro-pastoral conflicts can be explained simply with reference to cultural differences. Of course, conflicts derive from competing interests, which might be partly grounded in cultural differences, as is the case here. But cultural differences and competing interests do not need to lead to violence if there exists an efficient and legitimate political framework to manage conflicts. Violence can develop only with the failure or absence of political and social mechanisms to mitigate conflicts. If there were an institution to ensure that people would be fairly compensated if someone else damages their property, coexistence between farmers and herders would be much more peaceful. One problem is that farmers and herders disagree over which customary institution should solve conflicts. Another problem is that the national administration, supposedly neutral, is corrupt and inefficient.

Kwanja communities welcome foreigners as long as they accept the authority of Kwanja chiefs over their customary land (see Chapter 2). Thus, the right of free movement is usually accompanied by a duty to respect the local customs of the area within which one migrates. When migrants want to establish themselves some-
where, they are expected to ask the permission of the local leader, who distributes farming and grazing rights and resolves any conflicts arising from this process. The problem is that customary authority in the Tikar plain is ambiguous. In theory, Kwanja village chiefs (chiefs of the third degree in the official administrative hierarchy) are under the authority of the Sultan of Banyo (chief of the first degree). If they cannot solve a matter at the village court, people can appeal to the customary court of the Sultan or to the national courts. However, for historical reasons, Kwanja chiefs are reluctant to recognize the authority of the Sultan. More importantly, the chiefs and the Sultan compete for control over territorial resources, since the Sultan allocates grazing rights (and derives a lot of benefit from it) without consulting the local chiefs. As the Tikar plain acquired crucial importance for grazing strategies in the region, the Sultan started claiming greater authority over this area than he used to have, which conflicted with the authority of the local chiefs. Since herders obtain their grazing rights from the Sultan, they seldom bother to announce themselves to the local chief and believe they have acquired the right to move around as they wish. In cases of conflict, they often prefer to bring the matter directly to the Sultan, rather than accept the authority of the local chief.

Everybody agrees that those who have suffered from the destruction of their property should be compensated. Kwanja chiefs, the Sultan and the state all use this principle as the basis of conflict resolution. Herders should compensate farmers when their cattle enter their fields; farmers should compensate herders when they kill or injure their cattle. However, although the principles are simple, things are much more complicated in practice. First, there is a difference between the dry season and the rainy season, and between the Tikar plain and the Adamawa plateau. Farmers on the plateau face a permanent threat from cattle all year round, are expected to build fences around their fields, and would not receive any compensation if their fence is not strong enough or if cattle damage their fields (unless a herder deliberately destroys a fence or a field, which happens sometimes). In the plain, on the contrary, grazing happens only during the rainy season, after most fields have been har-
Fields are generally unfenced, and herders are considered responsible for any damage done. Secondly, a victim must find a culprit. It is not easy to establish the responsibility of a farmer in poisoning animals. It is not easier to establish the responsibility of a herder in causing agricultural damage. One must follow the traces of animals until one finds their owner, and the owner must accept responsibility. The best way is to catch cattle red-handed in a field and follow them until they get home to their owner. But this requires one to be in the right place at the right time.

Once the victim has identified a culprit (or a suspect), the conflict can either be brought to the customary authorities (the local chief or Sultan of Banyo), or the state authorities (the district officer or judge). In practice, however, none of these resolution mechanisms work properly. The problem with the customary authorities is that they suffer from a lack of recognition, since, in general, the herders do not recognise the legitimacy of the local chiefs, while the farmers do not recognise the legitimacy of the Sultan. The reluctance of the herders to obey the local leaders is partly linked to the fact that they received their grazing rights from the Sultan, and partly because of the way they define themselves as free men and the local people as “slaves”. They therefore tend to look down on the local farmers and their leaders (especially if they are known to be drunkards), and to require a Muslim leader as arbitrator. Farmers, on their side, bring their cases to the local chief and tend to reject the authority of the Sultan, even though he is officially the head of the highest customary court to which one can appeal if a local chief cannot solve a conflict. Farmers perceive the Sultan’s court as being corrupt, with many intermediaries requiring money in order to present the case from a favourable angle. Moreover, they perceive the Sultan as being biased towards herders for personal reasons (the Sultan owns some of the biggest herds in the region). There is thus competition between The sultan and local chiefs for the authority to distribute grazing rights and to manage agro-

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14 The time of the transhumance is determined each year by prefectoral order, starting after the harvest and ending before the new farming season. This local law prevents herders from establishing themselves permanently in the plain, despite the pressure in this direction. It also prevents agro-pastoral conflicts in the plain during the rainy season.
pastoral conflicts: the farmers tend to support their local leaders, the herders to support the Sultan’s authority.15

As is usual in such conflicts over customary authority, people appeal to the state. The problem is that the state’s procedures are very long and costly. First, the extension agents of both agriculture and livestock must evaluate the damage and agree on the amount of compensation. Then a policeman transfers this information to the judge. It is the plaintiff (usually the farmer) who has to pay for the transport of the extension agents and the policeman. All the actors of the conflict have to spend time and transport costs to be in court, which often delays its judgement further. Many people are involved in the process, such as extension agents, policemen, secretaries and judges. Cameroon being considered as one of the most corrupt countries in the world, the high number of actors involved increases the potential for influencing the verdict with bribes. Corruption is so widespread that it is often practised quite openly. For example, I met one new district officer in Mayo-Darle who, instead of being concerned, seemed extremely pleased to hear that there were serious agro-pastoral problems in his sub-district, as this constituted a promising source of bribes. During one of my periods of fieldwork, the court of justice of Banyo also entered into conflict with the Sultan, who was siphoning off and solving too many cases, thus leaving less business to the official court and fewer opportunities to obtain bribes. Almost all my informants agreed that the cases brought to the judicial or administrative authorities are judged in favour of those who can bribe the most, not those with the strongest case (see also Alou 2001). And since those who are able to give the biggest bribe are usually the herders (one head of cattle can fetch the same price as what a farmer would produce in a whole year), they usually walk away from court without having to pay any compensation to the farmers. Being unable to obtain justice in court, farmers then become more prepared to seek justice themselves through violence

15 A recent decision by the Sultan of Banyo to delegate the power to judge agro-pastoral conflicts to local chiefs is an important step in the right direction. Pastoralists are now forced to deal with local chiefs and must show greater understanding of the local context when grazing their cattle in the Tikar plain. However, as long as the allocation of grazing rights have not been decentralised to the level of local chiefs, the problem is likely to remain.
what they call “the justice of the machete” (killing cattle, injuring herders) or “the justice of the match” (burning herders’ houses).

**Historical roots**

Farmers complain that herders would rather spend more money in bribing the authorities than in compensating farmers for crop damage (see also Adebayo 1997: 105-6), and they explain this behaviour in terms of Fulbe racism. Whether over fencing or compensation, farmers believe that the Fulbe strongly resent doing anything that would benefit local communities, whom they perceive as being their “slaves”. Although we have seen that historical reality was more complex than this, the Kwanja simplify it as much as the Fulbe when they blame them (instead of the Sultan and his servants) for raiding their ancestors and selling them as slaves. Each community tends to simplify history in order to maximise difference when defining themselves in opposition to the conflicting interlocutor. Agro-pastoral conflicts then take on an extra dimension and build on a very violent history that calls for long-awaited revenge.

Farmers also complain that some herders are so sure of their superiority and impunity in the courts that they deliberately bring their cattle into the fields, sometimes even opening the gates to a fenced field. When the farmer complains, they laugh and say “Well, if you don’t like it, you can always bring me to court”, knowing very well that they will win their case through bribes. Although such behaviour is rare, it is nevertheless extremely detrimental to the confidence that people put in the system of justice. As they have the feeling that they cannot obtain any justice because the state is too corrupt and the herders are wealthier, farmers resort to imposing their own justice. They kill or injure cattle with their machetes when they find them in their fields, spray coffee pesticide around their fields in order to poison cattle, or beat up selfish herders. So far, these actions have been strongly condemned by the state. Herders are prompt to bring violent farmers to court, and they might not
even need to bribe the judge in order to win their case.\textsuperscript{16} Since the farmers do not obtain justice in court, and find themselves in even greater trouble when they try to inflict their own justice, they build up extreme frustrations, and the situation becomes explosive.

If just one agro-pastoral conflict becomes emblematic and degenerates in a murder and a cycle of retaliation, the conditions would be met to have a sudden outburst of extreme violence on a regional scale. All Fulbe herders and local farmers would be forced to take part in it, or suffer from a large-scale conflict started by just two of their members, not just because of the antagonism between livelihood practices, the historical conflict between local chiefs and Sultan or the failure of the state, but also because of the hatred between the Fulbe and the local populations. Consider, for example, the following statement I was given when I asked one Kwanja informant why his matrilineage was so small:

The Fulbe finished my entire family. The mother of my grandmother was the only woman who succeeded in escaping the slave raids, and my entire matrilineage derives from her alone. She told me that, when she was young, the army of the Sultan raided her village several times and seized any person it could find. Upon the arrival of the Fulbe, people hid in caves or in forests, and when the enemy was near, the mothers put their hands to the mouths and their nipples in the nostrils of their babies to prevent them from crying and disclosing their hiding place. They choked their babies to death while holding them in their arms to escape enslavement. Tears were running down the cheeks of my great-grandmother when she remembered this. For some weeks after hearing this story, I felt like fighting against the Fulbe, or even killing any Fulbe I met.

Of course, when this informant blames the “Fulbe”, he forgets that it was mainly the “Fulbe-ized” soldiers acting under the order of a “localized” Sultan who were involved, something that he would otherwise be well aware of (in another interview, this infor-

\textsuperscript{16} Some farmers have been brought to court just for having been seen spraying pesticide around their fields, even though no cattle had suffered from it. Some have also been brought to court when a cow had died a natural death in their field and were forced to pay compensation to the herder for the dead cow. As a result, they now always try to chase away sick cattle wandering unaccompanied in their fields, even in the dry season after the harvest is over.
Chapter 1: Kwanja-Fulbe conflicts

...mant insisted upon the fact that the Sultan was not a Fulbe but a mixture of Wawa and Kwanja). Yet, the statement is entirely representative of a general blaming of the Fulbe for slave raids – possibly reinforced by the way a simplified history is taught at school. It shows the important role that Manichean historical narratives can play in enhancing conflicts. When a group is blamed for the behaviour of a few trouble-makers, and this is perceived to be the prolongation of a long history of harsh exploitation, people are quick to say that they can no longer be treated as slaves but must take up arms to “free themselves”. The Kwanja village in which I did fieldwork takes pride in “being free from the Fulbe influence”. For example, villagers beat up one of the Sultan’s messengers who tried to force a divorced Kwanja woman to go back to her Fulbe husband. They also beat up a gendarme who was bribed to abuse a villager who was in conflict with a Fulbe motor-boy. They beat up some cattle herders who were caught red-handed grazing their cattle in someone else’s field. Such violence is fed by the impossibility of obtaining justice from the state – and even by the injustice that comes from the state backing up a few rich Fulbe. The statement that “We are no longer slaves” and the cry for emancipation is a powerful slogan which can easily rally many Kwanja supporters (something that appeals also to the Fulbe when it comes to liberating themselves from the constraints upon the freedom of movement). Thus, as soon as a conflict between two individuals is perceived to derive from a long history of exploitation, it can quickly be scaled up.

Solving agro-pastoral conflicts

Agro-pastoral conflicts exist at a variety of scales, characterized by the number of people participating in them, the level of violence and their frequency. At a lower scale, small conflicts between one farmer and one herder happen almost daily during the dry season. Most of them are solved amicably, but some do not and give way to verbal altercations. In the rarer cases when the herder and farmer resort to more than verbal violence (such as fighting or damaging one another’s property), the conflict generally involves more than...
these two actors, as family or village members as well as the local authorities will intervene. If the conflict is not solved at that level by the traditional or legal authorities, violence will erupt between groups instead of individuals – I have mentioned cases of village mobs beating up one or several herders and chasing them away. If such conflicts continue in the longer run, frustration will accumulate and civil wars aimed at cleansing a whole region of part of its population will be the logical step that follows, although it will need to be triggered by a serious crime, such as the death of one or several persons.17

Smaller and larger regional agro-pastoral conflicts in Adamawa have a similar structure; the difference between them (and the violence found at each level) is a question of degree, not of kind. The most serious forms of violence are not the result of anarchy or a lack of humanity, but rather of a structure that organises conflicts from the lower to the higher levels of social interaction. If this analysis is right, then the best way to prevent ethnic cleansing is to change the structure of violence that runs through different levels of society. Having a well-trained national police force and an army in sufficient numbers is not enough to maintain social peace; one also needs to solve or mitigate the most common conflicts at the lowest scale in order to prevent conflicts at larger scales.

Focusing on fencing only, as do local farmers, or on securing access to resources by giving land titles to all as practised by the gestion des terroirs approach, or else on marking clear boundaries between farming and grazing land (Teyssier et al. 2003) is unlikely to prevent future large-scale conflicts. Such approaches rest on the idea that insecure access to scarce resources is the crux of the problem, and better resource management the solution. They fail to realise that agro-pastoral conflicts are about much more than that. They are based on opposed perceptions of resources and problems. They rely on opposed livelihood strategies, different ways of occupying space, and opposite perceptions of who should bear the costs of controlling the boundary between agricultural and pastoral spaces. Above all, agro-pastoral conflicts are about the right to define man-

17 Pastoralists are more vulnerable here than agriculturalists in large-scale violent conflicts. Farmers do not even need to kill a herder to chase them away; killing their cattle is enough to make them lose everything.
agement rules and to solve conflicts. This is why a conflict over damaged property is commonly transformed into a conflict over who has the power and legitimacy to define what is right and wrong, and who has the power to judge a case. The Cameroonian state, the Sultan and Kwanja chiefs all compete to acquire or maintain these rights, which creates much ambiguity in the distribution of power. Although in theory Kwanja chiefs are under the authority of the Sultan, who is himself under the state, in practice the chiefs and the Sultan are seen as representing competing interests (they question each others’ authority and judgement), while the Cameroonian state is too corrupt and inefficient to be an impartial judge. As long as the social and political aspects of conflicts are not addressed satisfactorily, technical solutions to problems of scarcity or resource management will not be enough to prevent conflicts.

Competing livelihood strategies could be made more complementary if there was a better integration of agriculture and cattle-herding. At the beginning, having cattle permanently in the Tikar plain was likely to enhance conflicts between farmers and herders. But in the longer run, if farmers become herders at the same time, there would be the potential to develop draught power and use manure, which are both so far extremely limited. The day they derive some benefit from cattle, farmers are likely to show more tolerance vis-à-vis agro-pastoral conflicts. Moreover, the day the Kwanja start owning cattle and become responsible for agricultural damage, the victim will be the parents or neighbour of the culprit, and this will help in framing agro-pastoral conflicts in terms other than the historical opposition between the local and Fulbe communities.

Education can also contribute to downplaying the antagonism between

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18 Some Fulbe refugees expelled from the Mambila plateau in 2001 have established themselves permanently in the Tikar Plain, against the will of both agriculturalists from the plain and pastoralists from the plateau. During my last fieldwork in 2005, some of them refused to go back to Nigeria under the auspices of the UNHCR and were accordingly threatened with eviction from the plain by the Cameroonian authorities. What happens to them will be watched carefully, as many herders are ready to establish themselves permanently in the plain if it is tolerated.

19 This is what has happened among the neighbouring Wawa, whose rich traders often own cattle. Agropastoral conflicts have not disappeared, but they are now better accepted and managed differently.
Fulbe and non-Fulbe communities by talking more about the internal slave trade instead of focusing on the transatlantic trade only, and by making room for greater complexity when analysing the history of northern Cameroon. Dissociating Islam from Fulbe identity and making room for non-Fulbe forms of Islam would also help to combat the image of cultural, religious and political “imperialism” attached to Fulbe identity. Encouraging religious tolerance and reciprocal intermarriage between local and Fulbe communities (including Muslim women and Christian men) could create social bonds to help bridge former hierarchies.

The questions of power and rights are more sensitive and require careful consideration. Given the weakness of the state and the fact that it is unlikely to become much stronger in the near future, it would benefit from decentralizing the management of agro-pastoral conflicts to customary authorities and backing them up in case of need. Instead of arbitrating minor conflicts, the state could then concentrate on arbitrating those between different customary authorities (the chiefs and the Sultan) and on punishing their abuses of power. Defining clear responsibilities between local chiefs and sultans could help to prevent conflicts. Making it compulsory for herders to inform local chiefs of their presence in a chiefdom would help to identify the person responsible in cases of damage to fields. Moreover, making the Fulbe more dependent on the local chiefs would also help to decrease the arrogance of those herders who look down on non-Fulbe or non-Muslims and encourage them to look for conciliation instead of conflict. Finally, making those who benefit from cattle-herding depend more on those who lose from it would encourage the first to share benefits with the second. With a better share of the costs and benefits of transhumance, farmers (at least their chiefs) would probably acquire greater understanding of the inevitable problems that might arise from the presence of cattle in their agricultural area.

Autochthony is being increasingly seen as a problem in Cameroon, as in the rest of Africa. Claiming differential rights for autochthonous and internally migrant populations is perceived by many scholars as a dangerous path leading to racism (Bayart et al. 2001; Ceupens and Geschiere 2005; Geschiere and Nyamnjoh 2000; Kuper 2003). They advocate on the contrary an ethic of equal
rights among all citizens. However, this approach fails to address several fundamental and practical points. Most of the land in Adamawa is collectively claimed by local communities and their customary chiefs, as has been the case for many generations. Local people and chiefs are traditionally very hospitable and generously share access to their resources under the condition that the migrants respect the local structure of power and the local rules of land tenure and resource management. Advocating the right to move freely without attaching any duty to this right is the same as advocating the right to challenge any rule that existed prior to the arrival of the migrant (leading to a situation of “might is right”), and to fuel agro-pastoral conflicts. Advocating unconditional freedom of movement fuels racism instead of fighting it, since this is tantamount to advocating the right of migrants to dispossess the original population of power and resources and will inevitably lead to violent “racist” clashes expressed along cultural lines. Conversely, advocating the acceptance of local rules of ownership and management encourages the peaceful cohabitation of all citizens, who might not be equal in defining the management rules that apply locally, but who have equal rights under the application of these rules, without discrimination.

One cannot understand agro-pastoral conflicts in the Tikar plain without understanding the different livelihood strategies, history and social dynamics of the region. Addressing only one of these dimensions would do little to address the others, and would not be enough to solve pastoral conflicts. The conflicts are based on social, cultural, political and economic differences that run through local communities, from the lowest to the highest levels of social interaction. The more levels and components can be solved at the same time, the greater the likelihood that the structure of agro-pastoral conflicts will be effectively changed and will lose its potential for large-scale violence.

Conclusions

One cannot talk about the Kwanja’s social organisation and identity without reference to the Fulbe, who have exerted a tremendous in-
Conclusions

fluence over their lives and culture. There is a danger, however, when analysing conflicts between Kwanja and Fulbe, that we construct them as the result of essentialist antagonisms and dichotomies. The danger exists for pre-colonial conflicts, as well as for contemporary agro-pastoral conflicts. Both the Kwanja and the Fulbe have developed essentialist discourses presenting things in terms of unbridgeable oppositions, and running along such lines as master/slave, ruler/ruled, white/black, Muslim/pagan, migrant/authochtonous, global/local, legitimate/illegitimate, pastoralist/agriculturalist and sedentary/nomad. Yet, behind these essentialist discourses, both Kwanja and Fulbe informants also tell about the complexity of the issues, the intermarriages, political and military alliances, friendship ties, joking relationships, economic interdependencies, cultural and religious syncretism and grey zones of all sorts.

Agro-pastoral conflicts are not the objective result of a scarcity of resources or of an inevitable clash of civilizations, but political problems organised along the lines of a regional social structure that has deep historical roots. When studying these conflicts, one needs to find the right balance between simplistic dichotomies and complex realities. Both are necessary, as one cannot understand conflicts without understanding antagonisms that are framed in terms of dichotomies, or without knowing about the go-betweens that mitigate most conflicts before they become violent. In this chapter, I have tried to account for both aspects by describing the structure of historical conflicts (surviving partly in the structures of contemporary ones), and by deconstructing the clichés that present the Fulbe as natural-born Muslim rulers and the Kwanja as innocent, righteous, marginalised victims. On the contrary, I have argued that the Fulbe can only live and prosper in Adamawa by making different kinds of alliances with the Kwanja (and other local populations), and that the Kwanja, although they have suffered much in the past, are not passive subjects, but are successfully struggling to defend their own interests.
CHAPTER 2

KINSHIP

Describing the kinship system of the Kwanja proved to be a challenge, not least because I was confronted with the difficulty that nothing was written about them. I would be the first anthropologist who would have to decide whether their kinship structure should be described as cognatic, matrilineal, patrilineal or bilineal, and whether their kinship terminology should be referred to as Hawaiian, Crow or Omaha. According to the anthropological literature, the western part of Adamawa is characterised by a high diversity of kinship systems. The kinship structures of the Wawa and Mambila (to the north and west of the Kwanja) are primarily bilateral (Rehfish 1960; Zeitlyn 1994: 28, Gausset 1997b). The Bute (to the North and East of the Kwanja) are sometimes described as patrilineal (Hurault 1993: 172), sometimes as matrilineal (Siran 1981a, 1981b). The Tikar are described as both patrilineal and matrilineal (Price 1987, Annaud 2000). Even when looking at the wider region, one finds a mix of patrilineal, matrilineal, bilineal and cognate kinship systems. I was thus prepared for any possibility but, as my research developed, I nevertheless became increasingly puzzled by the material I was collecting, which suggested that the Kwanja kinship structure was not cognatic, matrilineal or patrilineal, but everything at the same time, while their kinship terminology was not Hawaiian, Crow or Omaha, but all of them at once.

These questions are not just theoretical: they are important because kinship is one of the primary cements of society, defining how people relate to, and interact with one another. Kinship influences all aspects of social life, including the political, religious and economic spheres. Finally, the rules defining kinship are often extended beyond this domain and apply at higher levels of social interaction since chiefdoms or communities all use the idioms of kinship. By focusing on name inheritance and descent as important sources of social relatedness, this chapter will describe some of the first steps in constructing personal and collective identities.
Chapter 2: Kinship

Personal Identities

Among the Kwanja, people acquire a social identity at birth through being given a personal name and inheriting membership in their parents’ kinship groups. Kwanja names are not just personal but also refer to all those who have borne than name before. They are shared collectively and have a history, weaving or maintaining webs of relations in ways that can have a significant impact on the life of the name-bearer. Newborn children are usually given the name of a deceased relative. Personal names are not supposed to disappear after the death but should survive forever after the death of their bearer. When someone dies, his or her name should be given to one of his descendants, in either line.  

When a child is born, it is normally the father who chooses the name of his child, picking it from one of the deceased relatives on his father’s or mother’s side. A child who receives the name of a deceased person is supposed to acquire some of his or her personality traits, such as courage or kindness, although people do not talk about the reincarnation of the deceased person’s spirit into the child. Many Kwanja bear only one name, but Christian and Muslim children may also be given a first name (Christian or Muslim), which is added to the name.

One evening, Denis, my neighbour, paid me a visit. With time, he had become much more than a neighbour, more a friend. We spent long eve-

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20 The name of the same deceased person can be given to several children (both his or her son and daughter can decide to give it to one of their children, for example). Children given the same name become homonyms (toké, a term deriving from Fulfulde), and usually kindly joke with one another about this, but it does not make them the same social person, and they do not merge their kinship networks, as is the case when the name derives from a parent’s friend. They bear a common relationship to a deceased person rather than with one another.

21 If the mother wishes to give the name of one of her deceased relatives to her child, she suggests this to her husband, who discusses it with his parents to see whether they have any objection.

22 When these people die, both their first name and their other name will be inherited. But if the child inheriting these names belongs to a different religion than that of the deceased person, a new first name (Christian or Muslim) is added to the original one. This explains why some Kwanja have mixed Muslim and Christian first names.
nings talking with one another, telling our lives to each other. A few
days before that evening, Françoise, his wife, who usually prepared food
for me, had given birth to a boy. Denis asked me for some money so that
he could buy the oil, food and palm wine necessary for the small ritual
during which the child comes out of the house. At first, I was annoyed
and reluctant. I had become tired of the many people asking for personal
help. But Denis insisted, not just because he had little money at that
moment, but also (with emotion in his voice) because he wanted to give
my name to his child. He told me how it had been hard for him to lose
both parents and to be an orphan when he was a little boy, and how he
had been struggling to build a family. He tried to find the words to tell
me how much our friendship meant to him. I understood that I could not
refuse to help him because it was much more than just a question of
money. Two days later, I was present at the ritual for the newborn baby,
who was given my name. Gaston, Françoise’s father, told me jokingly
that I was now his grandson, because he was the grandfather of Quentin,
and he insisted on me calling him grandfather (tumb22). Different peo-
ple, whom I did not know before, came to me to explain how they were
related to Quentin, and therefore to me. This is how I started acquiring a
Kwanja family and an insider’s perspective on the structure and meaning
of the complex web of Kwanja kinship. Later, when the name of my
girlfriend was given to a baby girl, everybody joked that I had acquired a
“wife” in the village. During my last stay in Cameroon (she had by then
become five years old), her parents jokingly called her to come and greet
her “husband” each time I visited her family.

Instead of giving the name of a deceased relative, some par-
ents may prefer to give their child the name of a living friend. In
this case, the adult and the child sharing the same name become one
and the same social person, and therefore claim to share their par-
ents. They acquire new duties and new rights vis-à-vis each other’s
parents. For example, they cannot marry the relatives of their
homonym, although the taboo is not as strictly enforced as it would
be with their own relatives. The decision to give such a name to the
child can come either from the parents or from the name-bearer. If
the idea comes from the name-bearer, the latter usually comes to his
or her friend with a small present (a chicken or a basin for the baby)
to express the wish to give his or her name to the coming child,
provided it is of the right gender. Such name-giving is done to rein-
force an existing friendship by making it closer to a relationship of
kinship (the two friends become related through the child’s name).
The fact that people are often called by the name of one of their
children reinforces this link. Francoise, my Kwanja “mother”, for example, is often called “maâ Quentin” or “Quentin’s mother.

An exception to these two ways of choosing a name is found when twins are born, in which case the first child is called Nyibî (if a boy) or Mibi (if a girl), the second child Nyâwârî (if a boy) or Mînyâŋ (if a girl). Moreover, when someone becomes a chief or notable, he is no longer called by his personal name, but automatically assumes the name (the “title”) of his predecessor, i.e. of the founder of the position. As will be discussed in the next chapter, he or she then identifies with all those who have borne that name before, to the point that they use the first person singular when explaining historical events concerning their ancestors. For example, a chief might say: “It was I who defeated this neighbouring chief in a battle”, as if the battle had happened recently and did not concern distant ancestors. Finally, it should also be noted that identity papers (and therefore, personal identities) can be shared by several relatives:

A Kwanja friend in Bankim told me proudly that his brother had once won the Mount Cameroon climbing competition, and he showed me an article describing this in an old newspaper. To my surprise, my friend’s name was in the newspaper headline. He laughed and explained to me that the name he was given at birth is different, but that he borrowed the birth certificate of his brother to enter secondary school. Since then, he has been officially known by the name of his brother, although his family continues to call him by the name they gave him at birth.

Many Kwanja children do not have birth certificate. Their parents have never bothered to declare their birth to the administrative authorities in Nyamboya or Mayo Djinga. The cost of transport and of the birth certificate, and the high rate of children’s mortality, makes the declaration of births unappealing. Keeping birth certificates in a safe place, out of the reach of termites, rats, humidity or fire, can also be a difficult task for poor farmers living in mud and

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23 The Kwanja consider that the first born is the youngest twin and the last born the eldest, since the eldest has sent the youngest first. But this does not make any difference in practice, since it is forbidden to treat twins differently.

24 Declaring deaths is even less common, unless the widow is eligible to receive a pension.
straw huts. Nonetheless a birth certificate and/or an identity card are required to pass national school exams, enter secondary school, find a job in the administration or travel freely. People without either a birth certificate or an identity card are kept out of the education system and the administrative job market. They remain trapped in their own village unless they avoid travelling on the main roads or can afford to pay bribes at police roadblocks. Someone without a birth certificate can declare the birth retrospectively, several years after it happened. The advantage of this procedure is that people can choose their date of birth and define themselves as younger than their biological age, so as to keep below the age limit for secondary school admission or administrative competitions. Or they can borrow the documents of a younger relative and be known under that name by the administration – as seen in the above quote, a common solution among the Kwanja.

All these examples show that names are at the same time both personal and collective. People are known by their names, but these are borrowed, inherited or conferred by parents’ friends, and thus shared with many people, deceased as well as living. As soon as they are born and are given a name, Kwanja babies are inscribed within wider social networks. The next logical step is inscription within one’s parents’ kinship groups.

**Kinship groups**

Anthropologists define a patrilineage as the group of persons descended from a common ancestor through the male line. A matrilineage, by contrast, is a group of persons descended from a common ancestor through the female line. A cognatic group is defined as comprising all people related to one another through the male and female lines or a mixture of both. In other words, to map out someone’s patrilineage, anthropologists first draw that person’s male parent (father) and repeat the operation indefinitely (father’s father, and so on) until the first male ancestor to be remembered, then they draw all the children of any male person on the graph and repeat the operation indefinitely. For a matrilineage, one just re-
places males with females. For a cognatic group, one draws all parents and children, without consideration of gender.

In practice, however, kinship groups exist only inasmuch as relationships are known or remembered and are recognised as having some sort of significance. In other words, such groups exist only if they are formalised, corporate and if their members share a common interest. All three kinds of kinship group (matrilineages, patrilineages and cognatic groups) are important among the Kwanja, but the genealogical depth of these groups and their collective interests differ.

Matrilineages

In the Sundani dialect, the matrilineage is referred to either as bòy or as “one/same intestine” (lání màán), “one/same witch” (mbèrà màán), or as both (lání mbèrà màán). The intestine is seen as an extension of the uterus, and is therefore shared through female line only. Witchcraft originates in an appendix situated in the intestine/uterus and it is said to be inherited matrilineally as is also the case for any hereditary disease. It is always the matrilineage that deals with any witchcraft accusation, whether proclaimed or received. The matrilineages that have become allied after a witchcraft accusation (see further down) joke with one another. Matrilineage members respect a strict exogamy, must be consulted before marriage, and either avoid or joke with their members’ in-laws. Some matrilineages have titles of nobility acquired during war, and some possess land, forests or stretches of rivers acquired in the past, either through war or by exchanging it for one young female member of the matrilineage.

People claim that matrilineages (mainly the brothers of the deceased) used to inherit all property. Today, the matrilineage just takes moveable property (money, clothes, livestock), leaving non-

25 The matrilineal inheritance of witchcraft is common in the region (even in societies that are not usually defined as matrilineal); see, for example, the Tikar (Beemster et al. 1993: 157; Annaud 2000: 359); Mambila (Zeitlyn 1994: 72); Chamba (Fardon 1988: 155); Bamileke and Bangwa (Pradelles 1991: 71); Bafut (Rowlands 1985: 211).
moveable property (houses, fields) to the children of the deceased. Coffee plantations established in the 1960s and 1970s constitute a problem since they are non-moveable plantations, but also used to grow the main cash crop of the region (moveable property), which required the investment of large amounts of money. It is therefore the object of conflict between the brothers of a deceased person (sharing the same mother, i.e. matrilineage) and the children of the deceased person (belonging to a different matrilineage), who feel that the plantation is theirs since they have worked it with their father. As the matrilineage is responsible for sharing the inheritance, the brothers of the deceased have often had the upper hand in inheriting coffee plantations, but this has not been without conflict (and sorcery accusations) regarding the children of the deceased, and there is a tendency to let children inherit more and more of their father’s property.

Apart from inheriting the presence or absence of witchcraft and moveable properties, matrilineages are exogamous, and their members share an obligation to care for one another in cases of need or conflict. They protect one another against witchcraft attacks and accusations, contribute to buying medicines in cases of sickness, and contribute to the expenses of burials and death rituals. It is rare (and strongly disapproved of) to find conflicts within a matrilineage. The depth of the matrilineage does not reach very far. Matrilineages do not have specific names, and one does not remember the name of an ancestress. A matrilineage extends only as far back as people can remember the relations of kinship linking its members (i.e. a few generations back). They tend to fission slowly, a tendency that is reinforced by the fact that they tend to be distributed in different villages.
Patrilineages, *ndīnda* and *će*r

A patrilineage is called *cirìnì*, a term that can also be used to refer to a geographical grouping of people having a mixed origin, such as a village or an “ethnic group”. Every patrilineage descends from a chief or notable and suggests a common territorial origin, usually referred to by the name of a fortified village (a “trench”). The name of the chief and of the original territory or village of the patrilineage constitutes one of the most important bases of collective identity and defines, in turn, “ethnic identity”, since a Kwanja person should normally belong to a “Kwanja” patrilineage and territory. Each patrilineage also has a certain number of taboos, and the rituals performed by and for someone are defined according to his or her patrilineal identity – not all patrilineages own masks, for ex-

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26 Most ancient villages were protected by a deep trench dug around them. These trenches can still be seen in abandoned villages, and some remain two to three metres deep, despite having been reforested and partly in filled (see fig. 9).
ample. The conflicts that one finds within a patrilineage usually turn around the inheritance of goods or political titles. Brothers (especially those of different mothers) are often accused of being jealous and of wanting to kill each other through sorcery to get rid of a competitor. The problems can be so serious that political titles that should be inherited patrilineally are often given to the son of a daughter or sister of the chief in order to avoid creating more conflicts within the patrilineage. This “son of a princess” is outside of the competition that takes place between the members of the patrilineage and his children will not inherit the title. He has fewer difficulties in dealing with conflicts and maintaining peace within the patrilineage.

Fig. 10: ndiyddâ, circle of sitting stones for the chief and his dignitaries or family

Because patrilineal identity is linked to tangible territories and chiefly titles that are still inherited today, patrilineages do not fission easily. If a branch of a patrilineage creates a new village, however, the chief might give the title of a dignitary to one of the pioneers, together with a part of his territory for him to look after. The new notable then becomes the founder of a new patrilineage but remains closely allied to the original one. Such alliances are formalised by a ndiyndi or car relationship. The word “ndiyndi”
Chapter 2: Kinship

derives from ndíyndí, which means “hearth”. It is said that, at the time of the creation of the chiefdom, the chief, his brothers and his sons were all living together and warming themselves around the same hearth in the chief’s courtyard, sitting on stones arranged in a circle (see fig. 10). Some of these brothers and sons created their own lineages but remained associated with their brothers’ patrilineages by virtue of being one another’s ndíyndí (for two men) or cár (for one man and one woman or for two women). Ndíyndí and cár help one another in war and, most importantly, lead each other’s rituals.

![Diagram of the ndíyndí and cár relationships linking allied patrilineages.](image)

The ndíyndí and cár relationship can also link people who are clearly unrelated. Patrilineages that migrated and fought local

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27 The members of the chief’s patrilineage are said to be “the children of the stone”. The stone refers to the “throne” of the chief (a flat stone as the seat, with a rectangular stone as its back) and, by extension, to the chief himself. A chief inherits the name of the first chief and is thereafter seen as the “father” of the patrilineage
patrilineages before making peace usually became integrated into the *ndíyandi* relationship. The military alliance was thus reinforced by a pseudo-kinship relationship (the *ndíyandi* and *cər* relation), which was accompanied by the reciprocal obligation to organise one another’s rites of passages, such as birth, funeral or enthronement ceremonies. The different groups of *ndíyandi* or *cər* are summarised in Table 2 (Chapter 3).

**Kindreds and cognatic groups**

While a cognatic group is ancestor focused and comprises all people sharing a common ancestor through the male and female lines or a mixture of both, a kindred is rather ego-centred. Both rely on bilateral principles and cut across many different patrilineages and matrilineages, a characteristic that is reinforced by polygamy, divorces, and widows who remarry. The Kwanja do not have their own term for these groups, which are generally referred to with the French word *famille*. The depth of the cognatic group is usually limited to adults sharing the same great-grandparent. They must observe a strict exogamy, help each other in times of need, and either avoid or joke with the in-laws of the members of the cognatic group members. Cognatic groups tend to share means of production (fields, labour), as well as unmoveable property. Fields, houses and trees are passed down from parents to children. The father’s unmoveable property is normally divided among the first children of each of the father’s wives, who will then replace their father in being responsible for their younger siblings. If the eldest child is a girl, she can theoretically assume this responsibility, although in practice she often leaves it to the eldest son, especially if she is married elsewhere. The eldest child can decide to keep the property un-

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28 A household survey of 380 households showed that 32.5% of adult women above the age of 25 have divorced at least once in their life (20% once and 12.5% more than once). 7.7% of all women 35 years old or below have been widowed at least once in their lives. All in all, 61.4% of all adult women live in monogamous marriages, 17% live in polygamous marriages and 21.4% remain unmarried and are either living on their own or together with their parents. A few of them have children but are not yet married, but most of them are divorced or widowed.
divided and make his or her younger siblings work together, or else decide to share everything according to the siblings’ needs. Although women tend to inherit much less than their brothers, especially if they leave the village when they get married, they can nevertheless inherit on a par with their brothers if they have specific needs: some women have inherited coffee plantations, for example.

As kindreds are ego-centered and are redefined each time a generation disappears, they tend to be filled with conflicts between siblings. Such conflicts and jealousies often exist between the half-siblings of different mothers, although they can also happen between full siblings. They usually come to the fore after the death of the common parent, or they can be triggered by such a death, due to conflict over sharing the inheritance. The disappearance of a parent in common tends to lead to a weakening of solidarity within the cognatic group, as it is much easier for someone to avoid helping a relative when no living parent is there to scold him or her.

*Households*

Households are the nodes that (re)produce lineages and kindreds and link them together. They are typically created by one man and one or several women having children. In the course of time, uterine nephews or daughters-in-laws and grandchildren may be attached to the household. When the male and female founders die, their children might first decide to stay together in the same household, but they will eventually end up creating their own household. Death and divorce will also create atypical (but nevertheless common) households, such as single-headed households, or households with a generation missing (grandparents and grandchildren whose parents have passed away or moved elsewhere). Apart from reproducing society and raising children, households also constitute production and consumption units. They grow and consume their own food,

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29 Young people often have children before becoming independent of their parents. They then continue to live with their parents until the young man quits school, starts making a living of his own, becomes an active farmer who can sustain himself and his family, and builds a house. Only then does he get married and start living with the mother of his children.
although they also sell some surplus to buy what they cannot produce.

Within the household, women are usually responsible for providing ingredients for the daily sauce (salt, taste enhancers, fish, leaves for the sauce), and to take care of domestic duties (finding water and firewood, cleaning the house, preparing food and caring for the children). Men are responsible for providing the staple food, building and maintaining the house, and paying for medicines, clothes and children’s school fees (although school fees used to be paid by members of the child’s matrilineage). Some women work together with their husbands in the same fields, especially during the early years of marriage. But most women work separately in their own fields, have their own granaries, and keep their harvest for themselves. They sell their personal production (either as grain or as a processed product such as beer or alcohol) to earn cash and meet their own social responsibilities. When they are established, women are supposed to pay for some of their cloth, the rest being given by the husband. Failure to live up to one’s responsibility towards one’s spouse is a common ground for divorce.

**Matriliny and patriliny**

Descent is defined on the basis of belonging to a group: “We speak of descent as patrilineal when a child belongs to the social group of his father, and as matrilineal when he belongs to the social group of his mother” (Rivers 1924: 86). There is thus a rule defining belongingness (matrilineal or patrilineal rule), and a group that results from its application. The problem is that, while the definition of the rule is relatively easy and unambiguous (descent through the father or through the mother), what counts as a “social group” is more difficult to define. Does it require exogamy (Rivers 1924; Fortes 1953), the sharing of common rights (Radcliffe-Brown 1952) or the sharing of common inheritable property (Fortes 1953; Goody 1961)? Is the inheritance of witchcraft enough to define a social or corporate group? Does a group need to have a name before it can be recognised as corporate? How far removed should the common an-
As we have seen among the Kwanja, many things can be inherited lineally: witchcraft, hereditary diseases, political titles, ritual duties, taboos, identities, moveable property, unmoveable property, widows, widowers, children, social rights, social duties, joking relationships, kinship terminologies, etc. Each one of these aspects, taken alone, would be sufficient to presuppose the existence of a group sharing a common interest. It might therefore be more correct to analyse descent by focusing on the rules defining groups (rules that might apply in very different contexts, such as the definition of witchcraft, exogamy, the organisation of rituals, the inheritance of political titles, names, etc.) than by focusing exclusively on “corporateness”. Such a shift in focus might help anthropologists clear up some of the difficulties in classifying societies and in analysing kinship dynamics.

For example, many anthropologists have a tendency to disregard the complexity of kinship relations and to simplify the situation by calling a society based on some form of lineal filiation either “matrilineal” or “patrilineal” – sometimes both. These shortcuts can create serious problems. For example, the Dìì (living in Adamawa, north of the Kwanja) are described as “patrilineal” although they have a Crow-like kinship terminology that implies some form of matrilineal principle is at work (Muller 1997), while the Bute (living directly north and east of the Kwanja) are sometimes described as patrilineal (Hurault 1993: 172), sometimes as matrilineal (Siran 1981a, 1981b), depending on the scholar. It is possible that the Bute of Banyo differ greatly from the Bute of Yoko. But it might also be the case that the Bute (or the Dìì) emphasise both matrilineal and patrilineal descent in different contexts that need to be specified in more detail. To say that a society is “patrilineal” or “matrilineal” is often a very broad approximation that conceals greater complexity. The problem can easily be solved as soon as one focuses the rules of filiation (matriliny, patriliny, cognatic) and looks at the different domains in which they apply, without having to choose only one of these domains as the most “corporate” and therefore as the one determining the kinship structure of a society. A society can be based on matrilineal descent.
without having “corporate matrilineages”, for example (Fortes 1949). Thus, defining a society as “patrilineal” or “matrilineal” should not just rely on the existence of corporate matrilineages or patrilineages and should not be based on an arbitrary definition of what constitutes “corporate groups”, but should be accompanied by a description of which aspects of social and cultural organisation are determined by which rule of filiation – something which is not done in the Human Relation Area Files, for example (see Murdock 1981).

Classic descent theory, categorizing societies as “patrilineal”, “matrilineal”, “bilineal” or “bilateral”, has allowed anthropologists to simplify the great complexity of combinations of various kinship principles in different contexts. It has also led them to make sweeping generalizations about the dynamics of kinship. Many anthropologists have predicted the decline of matrilineages and their replacement by patrilineages or bilateral kinship – thus running the risk of unknowingly reproducing evolutionist and Eurocentric biases regarding the superiority of patriliny and bilaterality (Bachofen 1861; Morgan 1870; Tylor 1889; Frazer 1910). For example, it is often believed that, “under economic changes brought about by contact with Western industrial nations, matrilineal descent groups gradually disintegrate” (Gough 1974: 631). In the 1940s and 1950s, most anthropologists supported the view that matriliny was a “dinosaur” whose survival was a “matter of wonder” (Douglas 1969: 123). If matriliny is so easily doomed, one might wonder where (and why) it originated at all, a question that might help to explain its strong resilience in the 21st century. Likewise, “bilineal” systems of kinship have been analysed as originating from a matrilineal system to which a patrilineal layer has been added by later conquerors (Ottenberg 1968: 19-21), by a change from matrilocality to patrilocality (Fox 1967: 137), or through a minority group of warriors being organized matrilineally in order to keep control over a larger confederation of conquered groups organized patrilineally (Fardon 1993: 195). They have seldom been seen as originating from internal changes within a patrilineal society from which matrilineal principles slowly emerge. When considering the diversity of kinship practices among the societies living on each side of the Cameroon-Nigeria border, including what Fardon (ibid.)
calls “The matrilocan belt of central Adamawa”, it is very difficult to think that “it is the curse of matriliny, in a sense, that it almost always grows out of the matrilocal situation” (Fox 1967: 121) and that it is doomed to disappear when societies change. On the contrary, it makes more sense to believe that matriliny can slowly grow and assume greater prominence in a society that used to be more strongly patrilineal or bilateral. Mary Douglas argues that the reinforcement of matriliny is found in certain ecological niches or in conditions of economic growth (Douglas 1969). But it can also derive from internal socio-cultural mechanisms, such as societies in which rights in uxorem tend to dominate.

Many societies around the Grassfields distinguish between rights in uxorem and in genetricem (Fardon 1984, 1985). To acquire more than the rights over his wife (in uxorem) and gain full custody of his children (rights in genetricem), a man must either engage in a sister exchange that should ideally produce an equal number of offspring on each side (Meek 1936, Muller 1980, Gausset 1997b: 220) or pay a heavy brideprice. If neither of these conditions is satisfied, the children remain under the authority of their mother’s parents, who will take any decision concerning their marriage (as well as the marriage of the daughters’ daughters if no sister exchange or heavy brideprice has been paid for their marriage). Chiefs often refuse bridewealth and retain the upper hand over the marriage of their daughters’ daughters (and daughters’ daughters’ daughters, etc.) as a way of increasing their political support through kinship alliances. As can be seen, matrilineages can emerge from systems in which a father’s rights in genetricem are very limited. Even when expensive brideprices are paid, they might not be able to extinguish the matrimonial debt (Pradelles de Latour 1991), nor might end the interest that people retain in their “matrilineal” offspring, since the bridewealth can be shared by the wife’s father and the wife’s MF/MM and MMF/MMM, and so on, or their heirs (Brain 1972: 118; Guffer 1995: 106).

There might be yet other mechanisms reinforcing matriliny. For example, the Kwanja practice neither sister exchange nor heavy brideprice (the control of marriages and offspring is of surprisingly little importance compared to neighbouring groups), and yet they have matrilineages that make decisions over their members’ mar-
Joking and avoiding marriages. If Kwanja matrilineages are not grounded in the control of female offspring, what do they rest on? I would argue that the inheritance of witchcraft in the uterine line, as well as the petty jealousies and conflicts over political inheritance within patrilineages, play a major role in the emergence and maintenance of matrilineages. Patrilineage members are a source of competition and tension, while matrilineages provide safe havens in which to seek help and protection. The conflict between the matrilineal and patrilineal rules of property inheritance does not threaten the concorde within matrilineages, but rather creates conflict between the members of a matrilineage and the children of its male members. This conflict is not between two groups (patrilineages against matrilineages) but between two inheritance rules applied to any individual. By changing a rule, what an individual wins on one side (inheriting more from the father, for example), he loses on the other (inheriting from the brother). This explains why such changes are not violent and do not threaten matrilineages or matriliny, although they might reduce its field of application.

**Joking and avoiding**

Joking relationships have been analysed by anthropologists as mechanisms that create equality between groups, an equality that is unfolded in speech and actions freed from all formality and conventions and that enforces peace, since people cannot be offended by insults (Paulme 1968: 24). One can distinguish two main types of joking relationship among the Kwanja. The first is based on relations between in-laws. Here, joking relationships are the mirror images of avoidance and respect. While avoidance maintains a formal distance between in-laws who are situated in conflicting positions, joking relationships diffuse the tensions by creating a “pseudo-kinship” between other in-laws. This type of joking relationship is temporary and shifts according to matrimonial alliances. The jokes are tender or slightly naughty and concern matrimonial duties.

The second type of joking relationship is based on historical truces and alliances between matrilineages, patrilineages, Kwanja groups or neighbouring ethnic groups. In this case, they are the mir-
ror images of war and conflict. Alliances tend to merge two conflicting groups through the sharing of blood or gizzard, and defuse tension by forbidding joking partners to take offence at insults. This type of alliance and joking relationship is permanent and relies on gross insults referring to witchcraft, murder and war.

Both types of joking relationship tend to remind people constantly of an existing alliance and to reinforce it. Both codify compulsory jokes that abolish social difference and diffuse the tensions that exist between different social groups, whether individuals, in-laws, matrilineages, patrilineages or ethnic groups.

**Kin and affines**

As a rule, one jokes with in-laws who are junior to one’s spouse, and one respects or avoids those who are senior. Reciprocally, one jokes with the spouses of elder relatives (such as the elder brother or sister or a maternal uncle or aunt), and one respects the spouses of younger relatives. These relationships apply very widely to all members of the kindred, as well as to all members of the matrilineage of the spouse, although the joking and avoidance relationships that are strongest are those with the closest relatives.

The avoidance relationship is called *gòn* (pl. *gònmbi*). *Gònmbi* should avoid meeting, talking to or looking at one another. It is the spouse who should actively avoid his or her elder in-laws. The *gòn* avoidance involves especially women, whether between themselves or when interacting with men. Men do not avoid one another as such but must nevertheless respect one another.

The joking relationship between close in-laws is called *gywèèri*. People are allowed great liberty in their joking, calling each other “husbands and wives”, or accusing each other of being lazy, useless, incapable of taking care of their spouse, etc. For example, ego jokingly calls the husband of an elder sister or maternal

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30 The *gòn* avoidance can be lifted if the elder in-law gives a chicken or a small gift to the younger one, telling him or her that the avoidance must end. The spouse must then reimburse the gift with a counter-gift (such as palm wine) and some money (for example, 1000 CFA). After this, they no longer need to avoid one another.
aunt “my husband”, and calls the wife of an elder brother or of a maternal uncle “my wife”, regardless of ego’s gender. Gvwèèrì can pretend to fight, but can also pretend to be in love, although they should not have any sexual relations, unlike among the Bute (Siran 1981a). When one sees a man and a woman holding one another by the hand or the shoulder, they are usually gvwèèrì.

One also jokes with all grandparents, calling them “husband and wife” when they are of opposite sex, and “concurrent” (dwàrá) when they are of the same sex. Finally, one jokingly calls one’s ndíndì’s wife or cár’s wife “my wife” and the husband of one’s cár “my husband”, regardless of one’s gender. These types of joke are not as strong as among gvwèèrì, and there are no insults between joking partners.

The joking relationships among affines can thus be accounted for by three rules. The first is that all the members of the cognatic group, matrilineage and ndíndì/cár of a spouse are considered as structurally similar to the spouse. Marrying someone is considered the same as marrying his or her entire matrilineage, cognatic group and allied patrilineages, whose members are called “wives or husbands” according to the gender of the spouse, but regardless of the gender of the interlocutor.

The second rule is that one distinguishes between in-laws belonging to the spouse’s own generation as well as of generations +1 and -1 (whom one treats according to their junior or senior position; see the third rule, below), and the spouses’ relatives of generations +2 and -2 (with whom one jokes). This rule applies to the spouses’ matrilineages and cognatic groups, but not to ndíndì and cár. It might be accounted for by the common structural equivalence between relatives of alternate generations, allowing them to regard each other as either “concurrents” (same gender) or “spouses” (different gender).31

Thirdly, one distinguishes between the spouses’ junior relatives (with whom one jokes) and senior relatives (whom one respects). This rule applies to the spouses’ matrilineages and cognatic groups of generations +1, 0 and -1, but not to generations +2 and -2.

31 This equivalence is strongest when marriage with cross-cousins is preferred, resulting in the grandchildren reproducing the social categories of their grandparents (Lévi-Strauss 1967: 365).
nor to ndiyndi and cər. This rule is sometimes explained with reference to the fact that it anticipates the possible inheritance of social status. Calling an elder brother’s wife “my wife”, or a maternal aunt’s husband “my husband” might reflect the practice of levirate and sororate, and indeed joking partners do sometimes end up as husbands and wives. But such marriages are unlikely (only one brother or nephew inherits the uncle’s wife, although all the younger brothers and nephews joke with her), and only apply to joking partners of opposite sex (although people of same sex also jokingly call each other husband and wife). Otherwise, this rule may stress the fact that the inheritance goes always in the same direction (juniors inherits from seniors and not vice versa).

Thus, all these rules distinguish between in-laws who are in a position of authority vis-à-vis the spouse (whom one respects), and those who are considered equivalent to the spouse (with whom one jokes), either because they belong to the same kinship group or to structurally equivalent generations, or because they are younger than the spouse.

_Gizzards and wizards_

A second type of joking relationship is based on historical alliances between competing groups. They both help people remember and reproduce the alliance, and help diffuse tensions and maintain peace by forcing people to joke with one another, thus preventing them from taking any insult seriously or from entering into conflicts. Such alliances are sealed by the sharing of a chicken’s gizzard, considered the best piece of meat. The gizzard (njâni, which also means “alliance”) is normally eaten by one person only. Its ritual sharing then creates an equivalence between those who share it or their entire communities. For example, a couple who are deeply in love and want to promise each other eternal love can share a gizzard or lick one another’s blood from cut thumbs. This creates a strong alliance that forces them to be always kind to one another and prevents them from arguing, fighting or divorcing. Doing so would bring down curse on them and their matrilineages. However, such alliances go beyond the two individuals to involve also their matrilineages, since the levirate or sororate must
be practised if one of the partners dies while still young. Although this alliance helps diffuse tensions and guarantee peace within the household, as such it does not involve any joking relationship between spouses or their matrilineages. However, there exist alliances based on the same principles that are much more permanent and imply joking relationships.

Allied matrilineages (Njáni) - When someone is accused of being a witch, the accusation touches the whole matrilineage of the accused person because, if hereditary witchcraft is present in one person, it is present in the entire matrilineage. The matrilineage can only defend its reputation by defending the accused person’s name. In the past, in order to clear all doubt, a decision could be taken to look for the presence of the black ball of witchcraft in the intestines of a member of the accused person’s matrilineage, and compare it with the intestine of a member of the accusing matrilineage. Both the accused and accusing matrilineages would then kill one of their young girls and open up their bellies to examine their intestines. If the appendix of witchcraft was found in the girl of one of the lineages but not in the other, the matrilineage with the witchcraft had to give one of its girls to the innocent matrilineage as compensation for the one who had been sacrificed. If witchcraft was found in both girls, or in neither of them, the two matrilineages became close allies. The heads of both matrilineages sealed their alliance by sharing the gizzard of a chicken (njáni, a name also used to characterise their new relation).

Njáni help each other whenever someone dies with a big belly (a pregnant woman or someone dying of a swollen belly). In the case of a pregnant woman, her child must be buried in another tomb, the body being orientated according to gender. Hereditary witchcraft is also associated with big bellies, as the black ball of witchcraft is said to make the bellies of witches bigger than usual. Likewise, the poison ordeal is said to make the innocent vomit, but to swell the bellies of witches until they die (unless they confess). People dying with a swollen belly cannot be buried unless a njáni operates on them with a ritual knife used only for this occasion to remove what is causing the swollen belly.

People joke with their njáni and the njáni of their father. They can jokingly insult each another, claiming that they are witches,
pretending to have killed or eaten each other’s parents (reference to witchcraft), or calling one another “owl” (a nocturnal animal associated with witchcraft). Another type of joke is when one comes with a terribly sad face to announce the death of one’s njáni’s parents. If the affected person believes this, he or she starts crying loudly out of deep sorrow until the njáni starts laughing and saying that it was just a joke. When someone dies and is being buried, a njáni can seize the corpse and prevent the burial, pretending that it is his or her meat, until given some money. Although these are some of the worse insults conceivable, njáni partners are forced to joke with one another without resentment. Njáni partners can pretend to have extremely violent arguments, shouting gross insults at each other and fighting, but it always ends up in great amusement.

It is forbidden to shed the blood of one’s njáni. When one is injured and meets one’s njáni, the latter must present one with a herb that the njáni takes and cuts. If the njáni sees the sore before being presented with the herb, the injured person must pay a symbolic fine (25 CFA). It is forbidden to point one’s weapon towards one’s njáni, and one must ask permission before one sharpens a machete in front of him/her. If one has a cloth that is partly damaged by fire, one can bring it to one’s njáni, who keeps it and must give a new cloth in exchange. If, on the other hand, someone is wearing a cloth partly damaged by fire and a njáni sees it, the njáni confiscates the cloth, giving anything in exchange, and the person who was wearing the cloth must pay a symbolic fine.

Allied villages and ethnic groups (Manjara) - The chiefs of two villages who are at war and want a durable peace can also share the same gizzard, and exchange blood, suck the blood of their ally’s thumb, or mix a few drops of their blood in a calabash of palm wine and drink it. This new alliance might be accompanied by an exchange of sisters or daughters. When two villages make this type of alliance, they become “manjara”, allies who are compelled to joke with and help one another.²³ While the origin of manjara relations between two villages is usually a war that is well remembered, the same relationship exists

²³ The term manjara is said to come from Fulfulde. It is sometimes referred to as njáni (alliance).
between entire ethnic groups (such as Mambila, Wawa, Bute and Kwanja), although the historical origins of such relationships are less well known. Some say that such relationships sealed a peace after war. Others explain it geographically, saying that people who live along the same rivers are manjara because those living downstream drink the dirt of those living upstream. This would explain the fact that a manjara living upstream can allow himself to drink the first calabash of beer at a party, while a manjara living downstream can allow himself to drink the last calabash of beer. In practice, however, any manjara can serve him- or herself and drink the first and last calabash, regardless of where they live. One drinks standing up and holding the calabash in the left hand, to jokingly insult the hosts.

Manjara must be given the gizzard when they are invited to eat chicken. They cannot fight and must warn each other if war or some danger is coming. As with njáni, one cannot take a knife out of its sheath or wear a cloth damaged by fire in front of a manjara, without being asked for a symbolic fine. It is forbidden to shed the blood of one’s manjara, which causes problems for nurses at local clinics, since it prevents them from doing injections for their manjara. One can jokingly insult one’s manjara, calling him or her “my meat”, including, as we have seen, dead bodies during funerals. In the case of a manjara relationship between two villages, there might be some specific rules. For example, between the Mbonjanga and Ndoumdjandi villages, if a man pretends jokingly to give something to his manjara, the manjara can take him literally and seize whatever was jokingly given, including his child or his wife. Or the people of Yimbere and Mbonjanga villages joke a little with one another and cannot show a weapon in front of one another since they have collaborated in war against a common enemy. This relationship is

33 Although the Fulbe have joking relationships with neighbouring communities in other west-African countries such as Nigeria or Burkina Faso, they have none in Adamawa. The strong resentment that many people nourish against the Fulbe (see the previous chapter) and the lack of a common enemy might have prevented any formal alliance between these communities.

34 This did not prevent some Wawa and Bute from making an alliance with the Fulbe and raiding their Kwanja and Mambila manjara. But the raids were mainly conducted by people who had been enrolled in the armies of the Sultan, which also enrolled Kwanja elements. There was no war between Wawa, Kwanja and Mambila villages.
quite loose and seems to be on the decline, but it shows that political alliances tend to be built on the model of *manjara* relations.

Given that the Kwanja are few and tend to intermarry, they are often related to one another. As a consequence, they can find themselves in an ambiguous position towards relatives. For example, if one marries a *njáni*, a *manjara* or a *cári ndíjndí*, one should both avoid the spouse’s elder in-laws or joke with them. In this case, the respect of the in-laws comes first, but is usually loosened by gifts and counter-gifts that end the avoidance and allow some jokes between them. The joking relationships are broadly defined, and every Kwanja might theoretically joke with thousands of individuals (all Mambila and Wawa, some Bute, plus most of the spouse’s relatives). In practice, however, the existence of a joking relationship does not always lead to real jokes, though they tend to define the tone of the conversation, whether it is serious or more relaxed. Actual jokes are made depending on the mood of the interlocutors and the context.

**Matrimonial alliances**

*You never flirt with a girl who is related to you in any way. But, sometimes, you don’t know that there is a relationship. If the girl is kind, she tells you as soon as you start approaching her. If she is nasty, she can let you try to seduce her in order to embarrass you later. She just laughs when you talk to her and you might think that she is laughing because she likes you and what you say. But when you invite her to meet you in your room, she says: “Don’t you know that I’m your sister? My father’s mother had the same mother as your father”. You then apologise. You are so ashamed of yourself. You say “I didn’t know, you forgive me, don’t you? Everything I said is already forgotten”. If the girl is really nasty, when you propose a rendezvous, she says “Not tonight; I will come tomorrow”. You expect her in the evening, but you are surprised to see her come in the morning. She asks you to follow her and she brings you to her parents. She tells them: “This boy wants to flirt with me. Have you never told him that I was his sister?” Your parents are ashamed, and you even more. You don’t know where to hide.

If neither you nor the girl knows that you are related, your relatives might tell you that you should not sleep with her, if they see that you are often with the girl and suspect that there is something between you. But such relationships are supposed to remain secret until you propose to marry her. You are not even supposed to sleep with her before getting married.*
course, nowadays, everybody does it, but you cannot go to someone and ask him: “Is there a relationship between that girl and me?” He will guess that you are interested in the girl and will tell your secret to the family. You will be ashamed. Likewise, you don’t ask a girl directly if she is related to you, because such thing is not asked directly. Moreover, it would be tantamount to telling her that you are interested in her, and it would not spare you shame if she was related to you. You might ask a friend, but most of the time he knows your family less well than you do.

In the village, you know your family relatively well. But it is more difficult to know people in neighbouring villages. The problem is that, in your own village, you have so many relatives that it is difficult to find a girl who is not related to you, and people know you so well that it is difficult to hide a relationship. On the other hand, if you are after a girl in a neighbouring village, you know your relatives less well and it is easier to make a mistake. The Kwanja family is so widespread that you have relatives everywhere.

Exogamy and the repetition of alliances

It is strictly forbidden to marry someone belonging to one’s matrilineage. It is also forbidden to marry someone from the father’s matrilineage, and it is not good to marry someone from a grandfather’s matrilineage, but these two last restrictions are less strictly enforced than the first one. Reciprocally, one does not marry any child, and one should not marry any grandchild born by a man of one’s matrilineage. It is also strictly forbidden to marry within the cognatic group, i.e. to marry someone with whom one has one grandparent in common, and marrying someone sharing the same great-grandparent is also disapproved.

In a polygamous marriage, the second wife cannot be related to the first – she cannot come from her cognatic group or her own, her father’s or her grandfathers’ matrilineages. Such prohibitions end at the death of one of the partners, as the levirate and sororate can be practised with a younger sibling of the deceased spouse. Finally, it is forbidden to marry a spouse who has divorced a relative belonging to one’s matrilineage, cognatic group or ndǐndi, or belonging to one’s spouse’s matrilineage, cognatic group or ndǐndi, because such people (especially the ndǐndi) will be conducting one’s death rituals, and one must keep on good terms with them.
Chapter 2: Kinship

Matrimonial strategies

Exogamous rules seem to be aimed at marrying as far as possible matrilineally and cognatically. Moreover, people also try to avoid marrying a girl belonging to a matrilineage having hereditary witchcraft. As a result marrying a njâni can be positively valued since one knows that such a partner shares with ego the absence of witchcraft and is as close as possible to the matrilineage while still respecting exogamous rules. Such unions are supposed to be more stable than others, since the spouses can joke with one another and there can be no witchcraft accusation between the two matrilineages.35

Informants say that it used to be forbidden to marry someone of the same patrilineage, but that this is no longer the case. Marrying one’s ndîngndî or cûr, on the other hand, is seen as a very good thing, although there are no preferential marriages as such. Since such people are allies and are not supposed to fight one another, they are positively valued as partners, the matrimonial alliance reinforcing an existing military alliance. In the past, people tried to avoid marrying their daughters far away to avoid dispersing their own kin. When sacrificing to the ancestors during a masquerade today, people still specifically ask for many boys, rather than for girls who will marry away and whose children might fight against them. Since killing the members of one’s own matrilineage is unthinkable, and since wars tend to be waged at the level of a village (i.e. patrilineage), there was a tension between the localisation of patrilineages and the dispersal of matrilineages. As a result, people tried to marry their daughters as close as possible geographically, i.e. patrilineally, so that matrilineages would be geographically co-terminous with patrilineages and their members would avoid fighting one another.

Thus, in the past, the ideal partner had to be matrilineally as remote as possible, and geographically (patrilineally) as close as possible, while still respecting exogamous rules. Choosing the right partner required a certain balance between these two competing aims.

35 In the case of witchcraft accusations between two matrilineages whose members have intermarried, the accusing matrilineage can take its female member away from the husband belonging to the accused or accusing matrilineage, even if she does not have any conflict with her husband. I witnessed two such cases during my fieldwork.
While all the rules pushed the system in the direction of widespread exogamy, insecurity led to marriages with allied njåni being positively valued so as to avoid witchcraft accusations and make the marriage stronger, and similarly those with allied ndíijndì in order to “localise” matrilineages geographically. The fact that matriliney is so strong and that maternal uncles could extract their uterine nephews from the custody of the children’s father and raise them within a matrilineal environment also tended to localise matrilineages geographically, thus preventing fighting between members of the same matrilineage who belonged to different patrilineages. Thus, despite a formal rule of viri-patrilocality, the Kwanja seem to have succeeded in making this rule coincide with a certain degree of “uxori-avunculocality” by marrying their daughters to husbands in the vicinity or by taking their uterine nephews to live with them.36

Today, the context defining matrimonial strategies has changed. On the one hand, most communities have been broken up and dispersed by slave raids, concentrating in a few big villages. On the other hand, the pax germanica and pax gallica put an end to war, and therefore to the need to maintain patrilineal alliances. The ndíijndì and cər have lost their military significance. People can therefore be much stricter with exogamous rules than before, since they do not need to be bent to accommodate military alliances. It is the opposite trend that is witnessed, though. People claim that there has been a recent and general loosening of exogamous rules. First, Kwanja kinship and exogamous rules are so wide-ranging that they make it difficult for people to find a partner with whom they are totally unrelated, or to keep track of relations of kinship. Secondly, if elders were to oppose a union because of a distant relationship, young people might elope and take refuge among some friends or relatives, until they force their parents to accept the marriage. Western education has given young people greater courage with which to oppose their parents’ decisions. Thirdly, the Islamisation and Fulbe-ization of the Kwanja on the plateau has challenged the traditional exogamous rules and promoted marriages among cousins. The higher brideprice paid by Fulbe and Hausa creates an inflation of brideprice for Kwanja

36 Elders claim that matrilineages used to be more concentrated than they are today, and that the knives that are used to operate those who died with a “big belly” always used to stay in the same village, which is no longer the case.
women on the plateau and might play a role in the Kwanja acceptance of marriages among cousins as it keeps the brideprice circulating within the family.\(^{37}\)

**Complex or semi-complex structures of kinship?**

Although it can be defined as a complex structure (one is free to choose any partner among those who are not forbidden), another question is whether the Kwanja system of alliance should be characterised as semi-complex (see Lévi-Strauss 1967). The number of forbidden partners is so large that only a small number of partners are allowed in practice. The Kwanja differ from classical semi-complex systems, however, in that the repetition of alliances between two patrilineages or matrilineages is allowed, both for people of same sex or of different sex (two brothers can marry two sisters, or two men can “exchange sisters”).\(^{38}\) One can also marry in the matrilineage of the father’s co-wife or of the mother’s second husband. Such marriages can short-circuit some of the rights and duties of individuals. For example, “exchanging sisters” leads to a “neutralisation” of avoidance rules, since the avoidance between the two men and women will be reciprocated (no one will be higher).

\(^{37}\) When a man marries, he is supposed to organize work parties for his in-laws. He should give between ten and thirty litres of palm wine, up to a hundred cola nuts, between five and twenty litres of palm oil, one bag of salt, some money (between 5,000 and 50,000 CFA), and possibly soap or clothes to his parents-in-law. The amount spent depends on people’s wealth. Poor people will not spend more than 10,000 CFA, which is extremely low by regional standards. Even in the past, iron hoes (some of the most valuable goods of the time) did not form part of the brideprice. Despite the low price, young people often get married without fulfilling all their obligations and promise to pay later, normally after two or three children have been born. Moreover, divorced or widowed women are usually married without any brideprice.

\(^{38}\) The Kwanja have never practised marriage by exchange as such (except, perhaps, to create or reinforce political alliances). Brideprice has never been an obstacle to marriage, and no attempts are made to reciprocate alliances between lineages, although such alliances are not forbidden either. Note that the Dii also have a semi-complex system of alliance, although they allow the repetition of alliance between siblings of the same sex (Muller 1998).
Contrary to what is found in other semi-complex systems (see, for example, Héritier 1981: 124; Sindzingre 1990: 35), Kwanja alliances are ego-centred rather than lineage-centred. The specific matrimonial strategies (marrying geographically or patrilineally close, or marrying allies to prevent conflict, avoid witchcraft or secure a stable marriage) conform to a logic of avoiding conflict with relatives, rather than obey a logic of matrimonial reciprocity. The prohibition on repeating an alliance is thought of in individual terms (avoiding incest) rather than in terms of completing an exchange between lineages that has to be reciprocated. The repetition of alliances is forbidden for individuals who have already taken a spouse in one lineage, but not for other members of the lineage. Moreover, such ego-centered prohibitions are temporary and end with the death of the spouse. The prohibition on marrying someone who has divorced a relative is explained in terms of conflict avoidance rather than as a measure aiming at preventing the repetition of an alliance. The Kwanja semi-complex system of alliances therefore seems to be closer to complex structures than to elementary structures. Although some authors (Héritier 1981; Copet-Rougier 1990) see the prohibition on siblings of same sex repeating an existing alliance between two lineages as a characteristic of semi-complex systems, this affects semi-complex systems that are closer to elementary structures of kinship than to complex ones.\footnote{Françoise Héritier herself gives two explanations for the prohibition on repeating alliances. The first, which applies to the Kwanja, is that a man cannot marry two sisters because he would connect their sexuality, thus creating a kind of incest between them (Héritier 1979: 218-26). The second, which does not apply to the Kwanja, is based on the obligation to reciprocate existing alliances before repeating them (Héritier 1981).}

**Kinship terminology**

Classical kinship terminologies tend to be associated with a certain mode of descent. For example, Crow skewing creating an equivalence among members of the father’s matrilineage usually requires matrilineal principles, while Omaha skewing creating a terminological equivalence between members of the mother’s patrilineage require patrilineal ones, and Hawaiian terminologies (creating an
equivalence within a generation and making no distinction between cross and parallel cousins) usually imply the existence of cognatic groups. The Kwanja have matrilineages, patrilineages and cognatic groups (or kindreds). What sort of kinship terminology do they have? As we will see below, it mixes Omaha, Crow and Hawaiian principles. In a previous article (Gausset 1998), I have advocated deconstructing classical kinship terminologies into their constitutive principles. In what follows, I will try to put this into practice and to show that the complex Kwanja terminological system is generated by the combination of a limited number of diacritical markers with reference to a few simple rules.

A terminology distinguishes people according to a number of limited criteria (the most common being gender and generation) that are combined in a few terms (such as mother, brother and so on). Different societies combine criteria differently and develop different kinship terminologies accordingly. But one needs to deconstruct the terms in respect of the different criteria that constitute them to understand the way they are constructed. In what follows, I will formalize these criteria with symbols developed along the lines sketched by Lounsbury (1964) and Buchler and Selby (1968).

**Hawaiian equivalences**

In naming close kin within their cognatic groups, the Kwanja use terms that combine three different markers: generation ($0 = \text{ego’s generation}$; $-2 = \text{two generation below}$, $+1 = \text{one generation above ego}$. etc.), gender ($\varnothing = \text{male}$; $\varnothing = \text{female}$) and seniority ($e = \text{elder}$; $y = \text{younger than ego}$, his/her relative or his/her affine). These markers are combined as follows:

- $\varnothing^{+2}$: male of generation $+2 = tâmbo$ (grandfather)
- $\varnothing^{+2}$: female of generation $+2 = yâ$ (grandmother)
- $\varnothing^{+1}$: male of generation $+1 = tâtâ$ (father)
- $\varnothing^{+1}$: female of generation $+1 = mâ$ (mother)
- $e\varnothing^0$: elder male of same generation $= bâbâ$ (big brother)
- $e\varnothing^0$: elder female of same generation $= kwâkâ$ (big sister)
- $y^0$: younger sibling of same generation $= dûm$ (little brother/sister)
- relative of generation -1 = mon (child)
- relative of generation -2 = ndòo (grandchild)

In generation +1, one can distinguish between parents who are elder or younger than ego’s “biological” father and mother by adding e = elder = kərì or y = younger = càm. Thus: e♂ +1 = tàtà kərì; e♀ +1; mà kərì; y♂ +1 = tàtà càm; and y♀ +1 = mà càm

Such formalism, combining only three criteria (generation, gender and seniority), can generate, in theory, twenty different terms. In practice, however, there is a hierarchy among the different markers. All kinship terms characterizing the cognatic group are distinguished by generation, and it can therefore be concluded that generation is the single most important terminological criterion for the cognatic group – which is, indeed, the primary characteristic of Hāwaiian equivalences between cognates. Most terms are distinguished by gender, but only a few rely on seniority, mainly in generation 0. This type of diacritic formalism has the advantage of making the basis of the kinship terminology more visible, and it avoids taking the usual kinship symbols (M, F, D, S, Z, B, etc.) for granted.

Fig. 12: Hawaiian terminological principles applying to ego’s cognatic group
Crow and Omaha skewings

The terms defined above are also used for relatives of ego’s patrilineage and matrilineage, who are referred to as fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, and so on according to generation. However, when talking about relatives who are not members of the patrilineage or matrilineage (and are not members of the cognatic group), the kinship terminology treats all members of a lineage as equivalent. All members of a matrilineage will address the child of a male member as “child” (mon), as is the case for all members of a patrilineage in addressing the child of a female member. Reciprocally, one addresses all members of the father’s matrilineage as “father” and all members of the mother’s patrilineage as “mother”, regardless of the members’ gender. The lineage appears as one individual when interacting with members’ relatives (who are non-members). In this context, lineage membership becomes the most important criterion, and generation loses its importance, as it is skewed within relatives’ lineages.

Fig. 13: Crow skewing principle. An member of a matrilineage (in white) calls any child of any man of the matrilineage (in grey) “child”, and calls any grandchild of
any man of the matrilineage (in black) “grandchild”. Reciprocally, one calls any member of the father’s matrilineage (regardless of their gender) “father”, and any member of both grandfathers’ matrilineages “grandfather” and “grandmother”, according to their gender.

Fig. 14: Omaha skewing principle. Any member of a patrilineage (in white) calls any child of any woman of the patrilineage (in grey) “child”, and calls any grandchild of any woman of the patrilineage (in black) “grandchild”. Reciprocally, one calls any member of the mother’s patrilineage (regardless of their gender): “mother”, except the chief, who is called “grandfather”, and any member of the grandmothers’ patrilineage “grandfather” and “grandmother”, according to their gender. The “children” of a patrilineage might play important political roles, as we will see in the next chapter.

Matrilineages and patrilineages behave as terminological entities. The kinship terms look the same, but must be accounted for by the combination of two new criteria: the lineage as a unit (“Mat” for the relationship between a matrilineage and its relative non-members; “Pat” for the relationship between a patrilineage and its relative non-members), and the genealogical distance from a lineage (+1 for the patrilineage of a mother or the matrilineage of a father, +2 for the patrilineage of a grandmother or the matrilineage of a grandfather, -1
for the child of a female member of the patrilineage or the male member of a matrilineage, and -2 for a grandchild of these persons). Gender plays a marginal role. These criteria are combined as follows:
- Mat+1 = mā (mother), regardless of the gender of the person.
- Pat+1 = tātā (father), regardless of the gender of the person.
- Mat+2 = Pat+2 = yā (grandmother) or tāmbōō (grandfather), according to the gender.
- Mat-1 = Pat-1 = mon (child), regardless of the sex of the person.
- Mat-2 = Pat-2 = ndō (grandchild), regardless of the sex of the person.

Affines

Formalizing the kinship terms for in-laws (as defined in the joking relationships described earlier) is more complex, as it depends on old criteria such as seniority and gender, but also on new ones such as a matrimonial alliance (∞ for “spouse”) and ego’s gender (defining whether someone should be avoided or merely respected). Inverted commas are used to help read the chain of relationships (∞ = male spouse (husband); ∞ = male relative’s spouse; ∞ = spouse’s male relative). These criteria are combined as follows:

- ∞ = sā (husband)
- ∞ = gvwigvwī (wife)
- e’ ∞ = y = gvwèèrè (joking partner, term of reference). The term of address depends on the spouse’s gender: ∞ y = e ∞ = ∞ y = gvwigvwī (wife), regardless of ego’s gender
- y’ ∞ = e = jwè (term of reference defining respect between men) or gôn (term of reference defining avoidance between women and across gender)

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40 I use the distinction between address and reference to mean the difference between talking to someone or talking about him or her, although I am aware that this distinction can be misleading: for example, there are several ways to address or refer to somebody, by using pronouns, names, titles or kin terms (Zeitlyn 1993a: 202-4). Among the Kwanja, as described earlier, the spouse of an elder relative is jokingly addressed as “husband” or “wife”, regardless of ego’s gender.
As we can see, seniority and the gender of spouses play major roles in defining affinal terms. Generation, on the contrary, plays no role at all (one jokes with in-laws of a generation above the spouse but younger than him or her; one avoids or respects those of a generation above the spouse but older than him or her). The gender of ego plays a certain role, since it defines how one avoids or jokes with the spouse’s relatives: men avoid women but never men, while women avoid women as well as men.

**Terminology in practice**

In theory, the coexistence of a Hawaiian generational equivalence among cognates, and of both Crow and Omaha skewing rules, is problematic. If we take the case of a patrilateral cross-cousin, for example (the son of the father’s full sister), he is a “brother” according to the Hawaiian rule of equivalence (he is of ego’s generation), a “father” according to the Crow skewing rule (a member of ego’s father’s matrilineage) and a “child” according to the Omaha skewing rule (the son of a female member of ego’s patrilineage). In practice, however, there is a kind of hierarchy between the different rules. The Hawaiian equivalence is used for close cognates who share at least one grandparent. The Crow skewing rule is used for the members of the father’s and grandfather’s matrilineages who are not covered by the Hawaiian equivalence, and the Omaha skewing rule is used for patrilineal who are not covered by the previous rules.

Besides the confusion of terms due to this competition, it is also possible to use two different terms for the same person under one rule. This may happen as a consequence of certain endogamous marriages. When a man marries a woman of his own patrilineage, for example, and has a daughter who bears a child, the patrilineage of the child’s mother will be the same as that of the child’s maternal grandmother. The child will therefore be able to call the members of that patrilineage either “mother” or “grandfather” and “grandmother”. It seems that in such a case, relative age compared to ego is the decisive factor in the choice, although it might depend on other factors. There is room, for example, to prefer to use the term “mother” rather than “grandfather”, preferring the closer term in
order to stress respect. As Zeitlyn (1993a: 214-16) has shown, the use of a kin term is not context-free but can involve a strategic choice which depends on the situation.

As often happens in such terminological systems, there are some anomalies. A small child might be the “grandfather” of an old man. In such cases, the Kwanja might prefer to use a term referring to relative age (or relative generation) rather than to structural generation or lineage membership, and call an old man “grandfather” to show him respect. This also applies to older people to whom one is not related. Furthermore, although Kwanja kinship is in theory very extensive, people do not know all their kin and do not always know the exact relationships linking them to the kin they do know. Consequently, beyond a certain degree of kinship, the terminological rules are not followed, and the choice of a term to address a relative becomes quite pragmatic, depending on the situation or the age of the interlocutor.

Conclusions

Kinship constitutes one of the backbones of social organisation. It is also often the door through which anthropologists become integrated into their host societies. By being adopted into a local family when my name was given to a newborn baby, I became incorporated into a new network and had to learn all the rules that organised it – how to address people, how to behave (including joking and avoiding), what kind of help and solidarity were expected, and so on. I would probably not have been able to understand Kwanja kinship in the same way had I remained out of any Kwanja family network.

But experiencing a family network and trying to make sense of the different rules that organise it are two different things. One of the first challenges I encountered was to answer the simple question whether the Kwanja were patrilineal, matrilineal, or both, and to what extent I could talk about “lineages” at all. Focusing on lineality rather than corporateness has allowed me to rethink the definition of lineages and to argue that matriliny, for example, is much more widespread than previously thought, including in many socie-
ties described summarily as “patrilineal” or “bilateral”. A society can be “matrilineal” (based on the limited application of matriliny to some aspects of its socio-cultural life), even though it has no “corporate” matrilineages, and even though its “matrilineages” owns no common property, for example. The dynamic equilibrium of lineal principles and kinship groups appears as the result of competing rules pushing and pulling in different directions, each with its cost and benefit, an analysis that can be extended to the strategies of patrilineages and matrilineages in matrimonial exchanges.

Likewise, the kinship terminology of the Kwanja is extremely complex. The deconstruction of kinship terms in respect of diacritical markers based on gender, generation, seniority, and the like can help simplify this complexity and allow us to grasp better the nature of the building materials used in terminologies. The description of the different descent rules and of the contexts in which they should be used can also seem uncomplicated. But the simple fact that different competing rules coexist makes it impossible, in practice, to know for sure how someone will address someone else, as the particular term will be chosen according to the context and the type of social relationship that the two actors wish to stress.

Two important points should be retained from this chapter. The first is that complexity derives from the coexistence and combination of different deterministic rules. The more rules there are, the more they enter into competition with one another and the more room for manoeuvre there is in negotiating them according to context, as can be seen in the balance between matriliny and patriliny, patrilocality and avunculocality, as well as in matrimonial alliances or the conflict between different terminological principles. The second is that the rules applying at one level of social organisation might be reproduced at other levels, as we have seen with the way joking relationships are created along similar lines, regardless of whether they exist between two individuals, two lineages, two villages or two ethnic groups. The same mechanism is at play when the rules defining kinship are applied at the levels of the village and ethnic group, as will be discussed in Chapters 3 and 7 respectively.
CHAPTER 3

KWANJA CHIEFDOMS AND GROUPS

Recording the historical origin of the Kwanja was one of the things I had to do to understand who the Kwanja are and where they come from. However, this soon proved so complex that I considered setting this issue aside and concentrating on other aspects of their social organization. But I was not allowed to do so, as my assistants and informants insisted on the importance of recording oral histories in detail. Every chief and every lineage wanted to have its history in the book I was going to write. I was thus compelled to spend much more time than originally planned in tediously recording the historical narratives of the different Kwanja patrilineages. This is how I came to realise that the Kwanja are an aggregate of very different groups displaying a great deal of cultural diversity. In this chapter, I start by presenting the political structure of the Kwanja chiefdoms before summarizing the cultural diversity of the different groups and their oral histories. I then analyse the common narrative structure that frames the oral histories and discusses what this says about the nature of power, as well as about the history of the Kwanja. I end by presenting different models of ethnogenesis and discussing which one applies best to the Kwanja.

Chiefs and territories

Customary chiefs

Chiefs (mgbă) are usually distinguished from dignitaries (gáŋndî) in that they have the exclusive right to take the skin of a leopard or a python killed on their territory, as well as the feathers of a red bird.41 Each “leopard chief” is normally independent of the others,

41 The leopard is feared by all animals and is therefore seen as their chief. A certain bird with red feathers is seen as the chief of all birds since they stop singing
and there is no paramount chief (Gausset 1997a; 1997b). All chiefs rule over a territory, organise rituals and are responsible for solving conflicts within their chiefdom. They have the right to take the back leg of any cloven-hoofed game (buffaloes, antelopes, etc.) killed on their territory. Some of these rights can be delegated to notables, who may have their own village and territory, and solve problems or take the back legs of cloven-hoofed game killed within it. Some notables do not rule over a territory but have their title linked to a certain function, such as bodyguard, war chief, barber, organiser of masquerades, and so on. Chiefs and notables are buried in a sitting position (if they have organised the enthronement ceremony that gives them the right to do so), but only the chiefs and some important notables will have their skull removed after a few months and placed together with the skulls of their predecessors in a separate cemetery.

There is an implicit hierarchy among the different types of chiefs and notables. The highest chiefs are those who can skin leopards and pythons, then come those who have lost these rights but retain all the other chiefly prerogatives (over their territory, notables, and the ritual treatment of their skull), followed by notables with their own territory who can take the back leg of cloven-hoofed game and are buried in a sitting position, and finally the notables without territory. Chiefly prerogatives are taken extremely seriously, especially when it comes to defending territorial rights. Failure to bring a dead royal animal or the back leg of an antelope to the chief can bring mystical sanctions down on the culprit; bringing them to the chief of a neighbouring territory is considered a serious offence and constitutes a casus belli.

Territorial boundaries are relatively well known. They follow rivers and ridges and are marked by large stones or specific trees in the savannah. Anybody wishing to cultivate a piece of land using a resource (fishing, felling trees, taking sands or stones in large quantities) or to establish himself within a territory should ask the permission to the chief or notable ruling over it. Chiefs do not

when they hear its cry, just as people stop talking and listen when the chief speaks. Some chiefs have lost the right to skin leopards and have thus become the subjects of those who have won this right, which sometimes makes it difficult to judge whether someone is a chief or a dignitary.
refuse to welcome “foreigners” (those coming from outside the chiefdom) and are prepared to allocate resources to them as long as they recognise the chief’s authority and as long as the chief receives a share of the profit made out of his natural resources. The region being characterised by a low density of population and an abundance of resource, chiefs were traditionally hospitable, providing land to foreigners coming from outside the chiefdom in order to increase the number of their followers. The wars to conquer territories were linked to acquiring prestige and authority rather than to control over scarce resources. If there ever were shortages, it was not of land but rather of people, hence the welcome given to foreigners. The chiefs who were most successful in attracting followers were not those with the biggest territory or the most resources, but rather those who were seen as good and generous, had firm mystical control of their territory, could provide abundance and could offer protection against witchcraft through their magical powers.

Modern challenges

Several changes have challenged the traditional power structure. First, leopards were exterminated with poisoned baits in the 1950s, to improve livestock herding. People still remember which chief has the right to skin a leopard, but this is no longer based on practice, except in the sense of wearing necklaces of leopard teeth. Secondly, very few chiefs live on their traditional territories today. Most of their ancestors sought refuge in the Tikar plain from slave raids in the mid-nineteenth century, and they were displaced again by the colonial policy of regrouping all villages along the national road built in 1952. The dam on the Mape river built in 1984 drowned large tracts of land and forced even more people to resettle along the major roads.

42 Most Kwanja are concentrating in three large villages and one town along this road (Nyamboya, Yimbere, Mayo Djinga and Mayo Darle), although there are also many smaller villages situated along minor roads or isolated in the bush.
In theory, “two leopard chiefs cannot live on the same savannah” but must be separated by a river. It is believed that two chiefs who live in the same village will inevitably end up competing for power or for the back legs of game or the skin of leopards, and will possibly try to kill one another to concentrate power in their own hands. But with the modern displacement of populations, many chiefs and notables are today living on the territory of another chief or notable and cohabitating with them. For example, the chiefs of Nyamboya and Yimbere moved their village on the territory of one of their notables when the road was built, together with other
leopard chiefs who were regrouped there with their population. Cloven game caught in a trap used to be given to the notable ruling over the territory, but today it can also be given to another chief or notable. When a hunter catches a python snake or cloven-hoofed game, he can bring it to different leopard chiefs, but is likely to present it to the chief who is the least greedy and who will only take a small piece of meat for himself, leaving most of it to the hunter. Or else he will choose a chief who will give him good blessings that will make him catch more game. As in older days, different chiefs are in competition to attract followers, and this is done using the same strategies (generosity, strong magical power), but the fact that they now compete on the same territory brings new tensions.

Another source of conflict is the management of land. The best farming land (forest, river banks) is becoming scarce, and the chiefs have started “selling” it to non-Kwanja. This commodification of land, together with the arrival of migrant herdsmen from the north and migrant farmers from the southwest, has given renewed importance to the control of territories. As a consequence, the titles of chiefs, which have ceased being inherited for decades, are now being revived and allocated again, so that their territory and migrants establishing themselves on it can be controlled.43 But this process has not always been unproblematic, as there are a few cases in which two competing individuals claim to be the same chief, usually one who has proclaimed himself as such (often living on the customary territory), the other having been chosen by the rightful ndiţndi chief or notable (and is often living in a small town).

They then compete for the right to allocate land and solve conflicts.

The reinvention of ancient titles also exacerbates old conflicts and creates new ones. At the time of my fieldwork, for example, the title of Nyangvwa was allocated again after a long gap. When the new chief decided to establish himself on his customary territory, Nyiyar, another chief who had been living there with his population for generations, decided to move his village a few kilo-

43 The titles of Nyangba, Nyamban, Nyawara, Yangogwam and Mabiri were revived during my fieldwork period, for example.
44 I heard such cases for Nyawara, Nyafama, Nyanyum, Nyamgba or Muko, for example. This problem exists for normal chiefs and notables, but is especially acute for those who have not been nominated for a long time.
metres further to avoid being under the authority of Nyangvwa and to retain his political independence. The commodification of land also brings new challenges for the control of territories, as can be seen from the following case, occurring between two of my periods of fieldwork, as told by one of my collaborators:

Nyamakpir owned a small territory but today lives on the territory of Nyinyem. He behaved as if he were the chief of Nyinyem’s territory, and Nyinyem did not dare to oppose Nyamakpir, but preferred to keep a low profile. But when Nyamakpir began to sell some land belonging to Nyawangung to some herdsmen, this chief brought the case before the sub-prefect and the Sultan. The Sultan looked at the map that I had drawn in my PhD thesis and asked Nyamakpir: “Is this little square your traditional territory, limited by such and such rivers?” He agreed. He was then asked why he was living on Nyiyem’s territory and why he wanted, on top of this, to sell the land of a third chief who did not have any boundary with his own territory? He remained speechless and lost his case.45

Although resettlements, migrations, the commodification of land, and subjection to the sultans’ and government courts have disturbed the customary division of power and territories, the challenges continue to be addressed within the old political and territorial order. People still know which territory they “come from”, even though they were born and have lived all their lives elsewhere. Living on the territory and under the authority of another chief than their own does not prevent them from wanting to keep control over their territory of origin. Chiefly titles are being revived to keep control of the territories on which migrants are settling. Territorial boundaries are contested by many more actors than before, but local strategies to manage conflicts have not changed: generosity and magical power to attract followers who must swear allegiance and political alliance, coupled with the threat of war and magical powers to deter competitors.

45 I had given one copy of my PhD thesis to the Sultan and to the Centre of Kwanja Literature. Although the map in my thesis is very approximate and cannot be used to solve a boundary problem (unlike the maps made by Jean Hurault, which are much more precise and often used to solve territorial conflicts), it could be used in this case since the land that was disputed clearly did not touch Nyamakpir’s traditional boundary but was on the boundary of two other chiefs.
Female chiefs

All chiefs can have female counterparts who help them solve conflicts, organise rituals, and prevent misfortune. Female chiefs are respected like male ones, especially during collective rituals or when solving a conflict involving women. Those who have organised their enthronement ceremony are buried in a sitting position, although their skull is not buried in a specific skull cemetery. Female chiefs have no title as such; they do not inherit the name of the original female chief like male chiefs do (see below). When a female chief dies, it is up to the male chief to appoint a new one if he wishes to have the help of a woman and if he knows of a good female candidate of his lineage (female chiefs are chosen within the same lineage as the corresponding male title). Some male chiefs or notables appoint several female chiefs (up to three or four), while other prefer to appoint none and to rule alone. Given the patri-virilocal preference for residence, female chiefs may live far from their male counterparts, making it more difficult for them to fulfil their duties. Male and female chiefs are seen as mirror images, on an equal footing, even though the institution of female chiefs and notables is not as formal as the corresponding male institution. We will find a similar situation when studying rituals, showing how female secret rituals are seen as mirror images of male ones, even though they seem to be less elaborate. Thus, although female political institutions seem to be dependent on and second to male ones, they are nevertheless symbolically seen as being on an equal footing rather than as inferior to male chiefs. This gender duality runs through most social activities.

Chiefs’ status

Chiefs and dignitaries occupy a very ambiguous position in Kwanja society. On the one hand, they are highly respected and are given magical means to fight against witchcraft and sorcery. Their eyes are “pierced” by medicine, allowing them to see the movements of spirits in the village. They are told about all the medicines possessed by any villager, and any person buying a new medicine must
inform the chief about it. A chief or notable must know everything about witchcraft and sorcery in order to be able to fight against them. On the other hand, chiefs can also use their powers against their own people, pursuing their personal interests by killing competitors or people who show them disrespect, or allowing witchcraft and sorcery in exchange for bribes. Although this accusation is typical of the general suspicion of corruption that characterises all positions of power in Cameroon, it also reflects the ambiguity of the chiefs’ power, which can both be used for good or for bad. Chiefs and dignitaries are often said to be “the heads of witches and sorcerers”. As a consequence, they cannot go through the poison ordeal killing criminals, as they would surely die if they did. They cannot even watch the person who drinks the poison, as the poison might react to their look and kill an innocent suspect.

As chiefs know all magical means, and as they are the ones regulating these means, people think that chiefs have a feeling of impunity, as if they were “above the law”. It is therefore all the more important to show them great respect and to avoid any conflict with them. For example, no one is supposed to be richer than the chief, not just because the chief must hold the highest social position in the village, but also because being richer than him would be likely to trigger his jealousy and to bring misfortune to one.

The ambiguous power of the chief is well illustrated by his close association with leopards. Like many nocturnal animals (cats, owls), leopards are associated with witchcraft and sorcery. They can attack and kill humans. Their whiskers are a dreadful poison and require careful handling. The leopard is said to be the chief of all animals, not because it is strong or clever, but because all animals fear it – just as all villagers fear their chiefs. Only a chief can begin to skin a dead leopard, sit on its skin, wear a necklace of leopard teeth, or smear himself with leopard fat. But the association is not just symbolic, it is also physical, as leopards spotted in the region are believed to be chiefs using their magic to transform themselves into that animal. When a leopard is killed, one expects a chief to die. The leopard’s body is treated like the body of a dead chief. No woman or child can see the dead body of a leopard, just as they cannot see the dead body of a chief or dignitary. When a dead leopard is carried back to the village, people are warned by drums play-
ing the same rhythm as when the body of a dead chief is being carried to his tomb. When chiefs die, a “leopard” is said to come near the village and cry in the bush (see the next chapter). The hunter who killed a leopard is treated like a chief, since “he has killed the chief”. He is carried by the crowd, given a red feather, can drink from the calabash of chiefs and becomes highly respected.

The symbolic association between chiefs and leopards is very strong and tells us something about the nature of a chief’s power. Like the leopard, the chief’s temper can be very difficult and he might kill without warning. Great care must therefore be taken to choose a chief who has a cool temper and to avoid upsetting him. Moreover, like the leopard, the chief is associated with murderers. He is always suspected of having killed the former chief so as to replace him. He is thought to have killed a child of his matrilineage to acquire the nywènì that allows him to transform himself into a leopard. He is expected to kill villagers who do not respect him or who compete against him. And he is said to be the head of all witches and sorcerers in the village, allowing (or sometimes ordering) them to kill their fellow villagers. The strong association with the leopard tells us that chiefs are feared rather than loved, although as we will see below this is counterbalanced by other associations that are more positive.

Title inheritance

Patrilineal titles

All titles of chiefs and about half the titles of notables are inherited patrilineally. A patrilineal title should normally go to the son of a former chief or notable according to his personal qualities (i.e. not necessarily the first born). If one chooses the brother of a chief, he should have a different mother than his predecessor. A new chief is normally chosen by his notable (and vice versa), although one might take the wishes of the dead chief into account when choosing his successor. Patrilineal titles are believed to be hotly contested among pretenders, which gives rise to numerous conflicts and accusations.
M was the “brother” of the chief and shared the same paternal grandfather with him. He was working as a civil servant and came back in the village after he retired. When a development project arrived in the area, the village decided to build a school. The village had to collect sand, stones, gravel, some money and the poles for the roof, and the project would then pay for the rest. The population waited for the chief to take the lead and organise the collection of material and money, but the chief did not do much. M, another retired government servant, the headmaster and myself then tried to organise collective work. After a few weeks of relative success, the chief accused his brother of wishing to kill him so as to replace him as the village head. M declared bitterly that he never wished to harm his brother, that he was only working for the development of the village and that if this was understood as personal ambition he would rather leave the school-building committee – which he immediately did. For one or two weeks, the two brothers avoided one another while explaining their respective cases to whoever was listening to them. Then, after some time, they started greeting one another again and slowly became reconciled.

This case contains many characteristics of conflicts between a chief and his agnates. The pretenders to the throne are often suspected of being jealous and of plotting to kill the chief or notable by magical means or poison to inherit his title. The suspicion can turn into an accusation if they are too successful or take too many initiatives, thus putting their brother in the shade. This is why a living chief will avoid declaring publicly whom he wishes to have as a successor to avoid the chosen heir being killed by competitors or poisoning the present chief so as to replace him as soon as possible. This also explains why many pretenders run away as soon as they hear about the death of the chief in order to avoid being chosen as the heir. Running away protects them both from the sorcery attacks of jealous pretenders, and from being suspected of having killed the previous chief. Likewise, when a notable gives a red feather to the new chief, this person is often expected to refuse and to fight against his notable, before accepting the fact that once the feather and title have been ritually given, they cannot be taken back. Finally, whenever a patrilineal chief or notable dies, his successor must swear under oath that he did not kill him, which reflects the widespread expectation that patrilineal competitors are ready to kill to take the throne.
When several successive holders of a patrilineal title do not live long on the throne, one suspects that sorcery or a curse is at work and that someone or something is killing all the title holders. To avoid more deaths, one then nominates the son of a chief’s sister or daughter. The children of the sisters and daughters of chiefs (i.e. their uterine grandchildren and uterine nephews) are “the sons of a woman of the patrilineage” and enjoy very strong and trusting relations with the members of their mother’s patrilineage, characterised by light joking relationships. Nominating them has the advantage of protecting the new chief from being suspected of having killed the former chief and from being attacked by jealous pretenders. It also avoids competition for the title between the sons of the deceased, as well as the problem of candidates running away or refusing to become the chief. The son of a chief’s sister or daughter has a reputation for bringing peace in the patrilineage. When he dies, the title is not inherited by his son but is again inherited within the patrilineage.

The authority of patrilineal chiefs is based on their physical and magical powers. The failure to obey dignitaries and chiefs is sanctioned by physical and mystical punishment. The obedience to the chief is comparable to the unconditional obedience that children must show towards their fathers. Just as one’s relationship with one’s father is often tense and characterised by authority and obedience, the relationship between members of the same patrilineage is characterised by competition, conflicts (as over the inheritance of goods or political titles), jealousy and suspicions of sorcery. Chiefs and dignitaries must constantly struggle to reaffirm their authority. They dare not talk openly of their succession, since pretenders will run away when a chief dies, and the new chief must take an anti-witchcraft oath. The fact that a patrilineal title should not be inherited by a brother of the same mother reinforces sorcery accusations within the patrilineage (and the feeling of protection within the matrilineage). Significantly, when conflicts within a patrilineage or over a patrilineal title become too serious, one tempers them by introducing matrilineal principles and temporarily conferring the title of chief or dignitary on the son of a “princess”, who will be better able to bring about peace, following a logic that will be discussed below.
Matrilineal titles

If all patrilinages have a title and a territory, only some matrilinages have these prerogatives. Matrilinage titles characterize about a quarter of all Kwanja notables (but they can account for more than three quarters of the notables in some chiefdoms). The territory controlled by a matrilinage may be quite small, like a forest or a length of river, or it can be larger. These territories have been either conquered militarily or bought by a matrilinage in exchange for one of its female members. Likewise, titles held by a matrilinage have either been bought in exchange for a female member or gained through a military conquest.

People have a number of options when choosing their residence. A Kwanja is usually expected to live in his father’s village and can always obtain land through the chief of his patrilinage. But those who belong to a matrilinage that controls some land can also obtain land through their matrilinage affiliation. As we saw in the previous chapter, matrilinage members often try to attract other members to live close to one another and use different strategies to do so. One can, for example, take a uterine nephew or niece away from the latter’s father and have him or her stay among his or her matrilinage members. In the past, the father could not oppose such action, though he could always take his own uterine nephews and nieces to live with him. This is still practised, although on a lesser scale than before. Protection from witchcraft and sorcery is another important point when choosing residence, since it is seldom practised against a member of the matrilinage (except against newborn babies). Unlike patrilinage dignitaries, matrilinage ones are not afraid of declaring publicly who they wish to have as a successor, and the pretenders to a matrilinage title do not run away when the notable dies. Matrilinage titles are never the object of competition.

The power of a matrilinage dignitary and the respect shown towards him derives from the mutual obligations found within a matrilinage. Members of the same matrilinage are supposed to care for one another, their relationships being based on trust, reciprocity and solidarity. This reflects the relationships that people have with their mother, showing eternal love and recognition for the person who gave them birth. Competition or jealousy between mem-
bers is banned, and authority within the matrilineage usually builds on consensus due to equality among members.

**Titles for the ndięndi**

There are a few titles that are not attached specifically to any patrilineage or matrilineage. Such titles can be inherited by someone who is not closely related to the former title-holder. They are said to be inherited by a ndięndi and can basically be given to any member of a patrilineage under the authority of a chief. The new notable is not chosen according to his relationship to the former title-holder, but rather according to his individual qualities. The origin of such titles might have been the historical collaboration of different patrilinages. If a territory was conquered or a trench dug out by allies, the title deriving from such actions would be shared among the different allies. Instead of being inherited by a son of the title-holder, it would be passed on to anybody among this group of ndięndi. It might also be the case that most titles shared among ndięndi relate to a special duty which can then be fulfilled by any subject of the chief (such as a war chief, for example), rather than to the control of a territory (which is specific to a certain patrilineage). Another possible origin is when a patrilineage becomes extinct. It is then preferred to give the title to a ndięndi, rather than abandon it and, with it, control of the territory. For example, at the time of my fieldwork, the title of Mabiri, whose line has been extinct for a long time, was restored and given to a ndięndi of his extinct patrilineage. It is unclear, however, whether the title will continue to be inherited by one of Mabiri’s ndięndi or whether it will go to one of his sons.

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46 For example, Nyambisam is a notable of Nyamgba, from Merka trench. Nyambisam has two other notables, Mumse and Nyakimer, whose titles are not inherited from father to son, but can be given to any member descended from Nyambisam, or also to any members descended from Nyamgba (Nyambissam’s ndięndi).
Groups and clusters of patrilineages

Kwanja groups

Given the small population of the Kwanja (around 10,000), one might expect to find a high degree of cultural homogeneity among them. The situation is, however, extremely complex, as one can distinguish at least nine Kwanja groups, whose characteristics and geographical origins differ widely (see table 1 and fig. 16). The “autochthonous” Kwanja are said to be the Nyandung and Nyasunda, although one group of Bute origin (the Bung) seems to have established itself in an empty territory and can therefore also be seen as autochthonous. The Kwanja have integrated “migrants” of Bute origin (Nyamboya, Kemba), Tikar origin (Mbonjanga, Mbonguer, Njonger) and Langa origin (Twendi, Yeka, Weri). People of Langa origin brought the masquerades that were adopted by some of the other Kwanja groups, who nevertheless retained specific and distinct rituals. Mbonjanga invented the ndíngi sticks that purify people who transgress taboos. All in all, the Kwanja groups speak three major dialects (Ndung, Sundani, Twendi) and had at least three more that today are extinct or dying (Bungni, Njangane, Yeni). The Kwanja are thus characterised by a high degree of diversity and a complex history of population movement and cultural borrowings. Migrating patrilineages might retain their political independence, specific rituals and dialect, or they might adopt those of the host groups (who can also adopt cultural traits from the migrant groups). Today, people continue to define themselves on the basis of these groups, even though the categories described above are blurred by intermarriages, the extinction of some dialects and the adoption of rituals or masquerades from neighbours.

Alliances of ndíngi and cər

As we can see, the Kwanja federate a number of very different groups, and the integration of these groups into the Nyandung, Nyasunda and Bung groups has not always been peaceful. But war led to peace and political alliances that were defined as kin-like through the ndíngi and cər relationships (see previous chapter). Despite lacking any centralized power, the Kwanja are organized in clusters of patri-
Groups and clusters of patrilineages

lineages that make political alliances. Before going further and analysing Kwanja chiefly history, it might help to summarise who is engaged in these alliances, as they usually reflect historical contacts between different Kwanja groups. In Table 2, every row stands for a group of ndiyndi and car, while every line within a row stands for one patrilineage having its own chief or notable (and dotted lines show the uncertainty of some boundaries). The patrilineages within the same row are “exo-ritual” in the sense that they rely on their ndiyndi allies to organise their own rituals.

As can be seen in Table 2, patrilineages linked by a ndiyndi relationship often belong to the same group. For example, the ndiyndi of the Nyasunda are all Nyasunda, and the ndiyndi of the Twendi are all Twendi. However, some groups are the ndiyndi of other groups (Nyandung and Ndek-Yi, Bung and Yeka, Nyandung and Njanga), which reflects historical alliances. It seems that people might sometimes prefer some ndiyndi over others to organise their rituals, as shown in table 2 by the dotted lines within a row. It should be noted, moreover, that the ndiyndi take on a different meaning when talking about chiefly rituals. The person who nominates a new chief is either a fellow chief or his first notable. If it is a fellow chief (Nyamboya can be nominated by Kembam, for example), the two peers are defined as ndiyndi, although their people are not considered such in the context of commoners’ rituals.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Geographical origin</th>
<th>Original dialect</th>
<th>Specific rituals</th>
<th>Chiefs and history</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nyandung and Ndeki-Yi</td>
<td>Autochthonous</td>
<td>Ndung</td>
<td>Do not use masquerades to end mourning ceremonies</td>
<td>First chiefs: Nyiyr, Nyanjim, Nyambisam, Nyambu, Nyikum, Nyavga, Nyawara and Nyamakper. Nyamboya came later and stole part of the power of Nyikum, Nyiyr and Nyanjim. He then attracted followers and formed a group of Kwanja called the Ndeki-Yi, which is today considered part of the Nyandung group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nyasunda</td>
<td>Autochthonous</td>
<td>Sundani</td>
<td>Most Nyasunda do not organise masquerades for the final mourning ceremonies. Only Nyaku does so.</td>
<td>First chiefs: Nyamban and Ngom. Yangogwam came later and confiscated part of Ngom's power. Nyaku used to be a notable of Nyamban but became independent when he conquered part of the Tikar plain, pushing the Tikar of Bankim further south. Nyamimber (or Yimbere) followed and seized the power of Nyamban, Ngom, Yangogwam and Nyaku.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bung</td>
<td>Buto/Autochthonous</td>
<td>Bungni (extinct)</td>
<td>They bought one mask from the Yeka, which comes out during the final mourning ceremonies.</td>
<td>First chiefs: Nyameuxe and Nyisum. Kemfum, who was originally related to Nyambwa, seized the power of Nyangiar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twendi</td>
<td>Langa (Mambila)</td>
<td>Twendi</td>
<td>Masquerades</td>
<td>First chiefs: Nyara, Nyafanna, Nyabia and Nyarba. Most Twendi live today in the plain, on the territory of Nyamimber and its notables. Nyakong was originally a Twendi but made war against the Tikar together with Nyaku and became the chief of a Tikar community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weri</td>
<td>Langa (Mambila)</td>
<td>Unknown. Speak Sundani today</td>
<td>Masquerades</td>
<td>First chief: Tiwer. Since Tiwer has become a Muslim and abandoned Kwanja custom, his notable Titambon has taken over.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yeka</td>
<td>Langa (Mambila)</td>
<td>Yeni (extinct)</td>
<td>Masquerades</td>
<td>First chiefs: Nyawang (or Banda in Fulfulde) and Mabiri. They made war against Nymakper and Nyameyme before making peace and being given a small territory. Mewa was first the dignitary of Nyawang before becoming the dignitary of Nyameyme and ending as dignitary of Yimbere.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Njanga</td>
<td>Mix of Tikar and Nyandung</td>
<td>Njanga (dying)</td>
<td>Mbonjanga produces the &quot;ndiangrin&quot; sticks which cool the hearts of people.</td>
<td>The village of Mbonjanga was founded by Nymakper (related to Nyawara) before he was deposed by Mbonjanga, a Tikar from across the Mbaem river.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tikar of Kfwan</td>
<td>Tikar from across the Mbaem river.</td>
<td>Tuma (Tikar)</td>
<td>Tikar rituals</td>
<td>Chiefs: Moonger and Njongo. Hambu and Gbubu are two notables of Moonger but live in Nyambwa. Njongo won a magical competition over the Tikar chiefs of Bankim, Banum and Banda. Although they are considered &quot;originally Tikar&quot;, many define themselves primarily as Kwanja nowadays.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Summary of the specificities of the different Kwanja groups
Groups and clusters of patrilineages

Fig. 16: Map summarizing movements of population and results of power struggles
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kwanja groups</th>
<th>Trenches (or geographical origin)</th>
<th>Chiefs/notables or patrilineages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nyandung</td>
<td>Merka: Ngarie (sub-trench)</td>
<td>Nyamgba Nyambisam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nyandung</td>
<td>Merka: Faghyi (sub-trench)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nyandung</td>
<td>Pangari</td>
<td>Nyanjim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ndek-Yi</td>
<td>(?)</td>
<td>Nyamboya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nyandung</td>
<td>Ngisam</td>
<td>Niyiiyar Nyikum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nyandung</td>
<td>Ndek-yi (?)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Niyiiyar Nyikum</td>
</tr>
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<td>Nyamboya</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nyandung</td>
<td>Nyamgba</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: List of chiefs or patrilineages linked by a *ndiyn di* relationship
Chiefly history

When someone becomes a chief or dignitary, he does not only inherit the title, territory, rights and duties of his ancestors. He also becomes one and the same person with his ancestors by inheriting their name, social position and personality, and by being buried in their collective tomb. Chiefs often talk about historical or mythological events as if they had happened recently and as if they were the ones who had performed them. One says, for example, that Chief Wanjang has taken the power of Nyamakpir as if it was something that the current Wanjang did some years ago. During my interviews, chiefs often identified with their predecessors and talked of these events in the first person (“I have taken his power “; “he cheated me and forced me to move elsewhere”, etc.). Similarly, one uses the present tense to say that Nyamboya is a thief and a murderer or that Nyaku is a frightening warrior who eats his enemies, although this refers mainly to past events.

It took me several months to record all the different local historical traditions about chiefs and notables, and a few years to become familiar with all the different names and places. But recording them was necessary to understand the historical movements of populations, cultural history, ritual and linguistic diversity, as well as political structures. Local historical traditions are usually built around a common narrative. The distribution of power in the present is explained with reference to a past in which an autochthonous group (considered as having inhabited the area since the origins of time) welcomes a “foreigner” from a neighbouring group or area, who challenges the authority of the local chief through a number of strategies – tricks, generosity, courage, war or magic. He then either wins part or all of the power of the chief, or is chased away. In what follows, I have chosen to focus on the narratives relating to only two chiefs, Nyayimber and Nyamboya, who created the two largest Kwanja villages (for more details of other chiefs, see Gausset 1997a).
Nyayimber and the Nyasunda chiefs

The Nyasunda claim to have always lived on their territory and to have arrived there by descending from the sky along a liana. The liana linked earth to sky until the day the terrestrial wife of a polygamous man who was visiting his other wife in the sky cut the liana out of jealousy. Having established themselves on the plateau, Nyasunda chiefs were attacked by invaders but were saved by the intervention of a foreigner, who ended up usurping their chiefly position:

A long time ago, before the arrival of the Fulbe, foreigners called the Mberba came from the Mambila plateau and installed themselves on the territory of Nyamban. They were short and their heads were big, so big that, if they fell on the ground, they needed help to stand up again. They attacked Nyamban and killed children who were working in the fields. Nyamban was old and could not defend his people. Nyayimber came from Basara and offered his help to Nyamban. He hid and followed the Mberba after they attacked Nyamban. He identified their chief and cut off his head with his machete during the night. He brought the head back to Nyamban, who asked him to stay nearby to protect him against the Mberba. Nyamban gave a territory to Nyayimber in Bapurka and gave him the right to skin leopards on his own territory. He did not have a title yet, and Nyamban called him “yin mbør”, or “He who discovered the Mberba”, which became Nyayimber and was transformed into Yimbere by colonial administrators. Nyamban was very old, and when he died, his people stayed with Nyayimber. The title of Nyamban stopped being given to new chiefs.

Nyayimber also took over the power of Yangogwam, who was abandoned by his population because of his stinginess. He was old and blind and touched the bones of the game legs that he received to make sure that the whole piece was given to him. Apart

47 The Mberba used to make big furrows to cultivate, and some informants identify them with the Mambila of Sonkolong
48 The title of Nyamban was again given to a new chief in 1995, after a very long interruption. I heard similar stories telling how Nyayimber saved Yangogwam from the Mberba and then took away his right to skin leopards.
49 Yangogwam then cursed his descendants, saying that no one should inherit his title after his death. For a long time his title was not given to anyone, but the curse was lifted recently when descendants of Yangogwam sacrificed a small buffalo.
from Nyamban and Yangogwam, Nyayimber also took the power of Ngom, another Nyasunda chief.

Nyayimber used to be the dignitary of Ngom and used to carry the bag containing all the “things of the chiefdom” (buffalo tail, leopard’s teeth, and so on). He became jealous and started plotting to seize Ngom’s power. Once, he used his *nywëni* to transform himself into an eagle and steal the buffalo tail with cowrie shells that Ngom had forgotten on his doorstep. Another day, when villagers were working collectively in Ngom’s field, Yimbere invited him to go to the river to bathe. Ngom did not want to go, but Nyayimber insisted so much that he finally agreed. It was the dry season and the level of water was low, but Nyayimber used his *nywëni* magic to provoke a flood. He kept Ngom under the water, threatening to drown him until Ngom agreed to give him his power. Since then, Nyayimber can skin a leopard, but Ngom can no longer do so.

The last Nyasunda chief to hand his power over to Nyayimber was Nyaku, a Nyasunda chief who had conquered a territory in the plain and pushed the Tikar of Bankim further south. As in many other accounts, one finds the stereotype of power being held by a chief who does not deserve it, so it is taken away by a generous foreigner. Nyaku used to be a chief who could skin leopards. He was an important chief and a fierce warrior who succeeded in chasing away the Tikar from Bankim, with the help of his notables Mewa (a Yeka) and Nyakong (a Twendi) as well as Ngom. Nyaku was married to a wife who was very stingy. Although people brought the back leg of cloven-hoofed animals to him, his wife wanted to keep everything for herself and refused to prepare food when important guests arrived in the village. Since this was very embarrassing, Nyaku preferred to give up his power and responsibilities to Nyayimber. Since then, Nyaku does not skin leopards anymore.

*Nyamboya and the Nyandung chiefs*

The Nyandung are the most important group of Kwanja and have had many chiefs who could skin leopards (Nyiyar, Nyanjim, Nyiyab, Nyamakper/Nyawara, Nyamgba and Nyangvwa). When Nyamboya migrated into the area, he took part of the power of Nyi-

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50 One finds the same story explaining how Nyawara seized power from Nyamakper. But Nyawara failed to win Nyamakper’s population, and the title was not passed down.

51 The original trench of Kimi (Bankim) is now found on the territory of Nyaku.
yab, Nyiyar and Nyanjim, in a series of complex events which have been reconstructed here from different interviews:

Nyamboya comes from a Bute area across the Mbam river, and has the same origin as Kembam and Nyagum. He was chased away from that area because he used witchcraft to kill people. After he crossed the Mbam river, he first installed himself next to the Mengapsim mountain, on the territory of Nyiyab. When Nyiyab met Nyamboya, he asked him where he had come from. But Nyamboya did not want to disclose his origin and claimed to have come from a lake. Nyiyab accused him of lying and chased him away. Nyamboya arrived on the territory of Nyikum. Nyikum saw smoke coming from that area and sent people to see what was there. When the scouts arrived they greeted Nyamboya several times, but Nyamboya refused to answer the greetings. Nyamboya’s wife explained to the visitors that they had to clap their hands when greeting him, in the same way as one greets a chief. When they did so, Nyamboya answered their greetings. Nyamboya had a necklace of leopard teeth and the kündóm, the specific haircut of chiefs. The scouts went back and told Nyikum that Nyamboya must be an important chief. Nyikum then asked Nyiyar what he should do, and Nyiyar asked him to install Nyamboya in “nywàryf” (in the fields), to stay under the granaries of Nyiyar. Nyamboya dug a small trench around the granaries because a chief cannot stay in the bush without a trench. At that time he still did not have a title, and the chiefs of the region agreed to give him one. They chose to call him “nyígònyag”, meaning “I came when the sun (nyag) was there”, i.e. at noon. This emphasised that the chief was a migrant who had come after the other chiefs had already been established. Later on, this name became Nyamboya. At that time, Nyamboya was staying on the other side of the Mayo Darle river (because two chiefs must be separated by a river) and had to send the leg of cloven-hoofed animals to Nyikum. But Nyamboya provoked river floods with his nywènì magic each time someone had to cross the river to bring the leg to Nyikum. This killed several people, and Nyikum then allowed Nyamboya to keep the legs of the animals killed on his territory. When war came, Nyikum asked Nyamboya to help him dig a trench to fortify his village. Nyikum was old and died. Nyiyar said that he would nominate the new chief after the war, but this took a while, and Nyikum dignitaries (such as Nyiben and Nyigangbar) followed Nyamboya instead. Since Nyamboya killed anyone who did not show him respect, he came to be

52 Other versions tell that Nyamboya decided to stay under the granaries himself, or that it was Nyiyar himself (and not Nyikum) who found Nyamboya.

53 One informant said that Nyikum gained the right to keep the legs of cloven-hoofed animals from Nyiyar by using the same trick of creating floods which killed those who crossed the river to bring the tribute to Nyiyar.
chiefly history

referred to as “nda yà” (“respect the other side”, i.e. the people on the other side of the river), which became Ndek-Yi. Nyamboya left and arrived at Nyiyar’s place. There, he told everyone that he had powerful hunting magic, which he would give to any hunter who agreed to give him the back leg of all cloven-hoofed animals that were killed, this being a chief’s prerogative. Instead of eating these legs, Nyamboya smoked them and stored them. He then organised a big feast with a lot of beer and meat for everyone. Everybody was happy and started saying that he was a better chief than Nyiyar. Nyiyar felt threatened and asked him to go to the plain to watch over his dignitaries living there.

On his way to the plain, Nyamboya stopped in Pangari village and hid under the granaries of Nyanjim. When anyone passed by, he did not answer their greetings unless the person concerned clapped in his hands. When Nyanjim heard of this, he brought Nyamboya before him and asked him who he was. Nyamboya said that he was a big chief who had come out of a lake, and Nyanjim invited him to sleep in his own house instead of under his granaries. Nyanjim gave him a mat to sleep on, but Nyamboya wanted a leopard skin which was hanging on the wall. Nyanjim did not like this skin because it was smelly and going rotten, so he gave it to Nyamboya. The following day, Nyamboya declared that he had slept very well on the leopard skin. Some time later Nyanjim died, and all those who inherited his title died without lasting long on the throne. A diviner noticed that they died because Nyanjim had given the leopard skin to Nyamboya. In the old days, if one gave something to someone, it was definitive and one could not take it back. Nyamboya was killing the Nyanjim chiefs because they continued to take leopard skins, although they had given that prerogative to him. This is how Nyanjim lost the right to take the skin of leopards and how Nyamboya won it. Nyanjim then decided to get rid of Nyamboya by asking him to go in the plain to watch over his dignitaries living there (Nyalen, Nyakek, Masu, Mbondung, Mbotim, Mbonam, Nyanbojom), and he stayed in Wungjung, the forest of Nyanbojom. To this day, if someone transgresses a chiefly taboo in Nyamboya (eating a python, skinning a leopard without the chief’s permission, sleeping with one of the chief’s wives), it is Nyanjim who comes to repair the transgression.

Chiefly narratives

The historical tradition concerning Nyamboya nicely summarises the different narrative figures that we have already seen with the Nyasunda. First, the chief must be generous and provide abundance. A recurrent criterion for judging a chief’s generosity is his distribution
of food and meat. Stingy chiefs who do not prepare food for guests, do not provide enough meat for their followers or are too strict when enforcing the obligation to be given the back leg of cloven-hoofed game are considered stingy. They risk losing their power over great magicians securing an abundance of game and/or great hunters distributing a profusion of meat to villagers.\textsuperscript{54}

Secondly, the chief must be strong; he must be a great hunter, warrior or magician. Weak chiefs (Nyamban, Yangogwam) give their powers over to strong ones or are abandoned by their followers. A chief’s magic can be used for good and provide success, for example at war (Nyayimber) or in hunting (Nyamboya). But it can also be used to harm people when it furthers their interests. One stereotypical story describes how a chief uses his nywènií magic to drown a competitor until he gives up his power.\textsuperscript{55} Another common narrative refers to chiefs creating floods to kill those who bring the back leg of cloven-hoofed game to the chief so that the chief feels compelled to give up a part of his territory, and the game that lives on it, to the new notable.\textsuperscript{56} Njonger (a Tikar of Kfwan) is famous in the region because he won a magical tournament over the Tikar chiefs of Bankim, Bandam and Batikong. As a result, he can no longer look at them face to face, a taboo that is still strictly enforced today.

Thirdly, the chief is a trickster. If he is smart enough, he can steal someone else’s power, or uncover those who wish to steal his power and send them elsewhere. If he is not smart, he loses part of his power or part of his territory. A common trick is to refrain from answering anyone who does not greet like a chief (by clapping hands), in order to be treated like an equal and being conferred automatically the status of a chief.\textsuperscript{57} Another trick is to ask for a leopard skin as a

\textsuperscript{54} I heard such narratives being told for the following chiefs (challenger/challenged): Nyamboya/Nyiyr, Nyambissam/Nyamgba, Yangogwam/Ngom, Nyayimber/Yangogwam, Nyayimber/Nyaku (and Nyamboya/Nyanjim, according to one doubtful informant).

\textsuperscript{55} I heard this for the following chiefs (winner/loser): Nyayimber/Ngom, Yangogwam/Ngom, Nyawara/Nyamakper (or Nyawangung/Twama, according to one doubtful informant).

\textsuperscript{56} I heard about this strategy being used by Nyikum/Nyiyr, Nyamboya/Nyikum, Nyambissam/Nyiyr.

\textsuperscript{57} I heard this used by Nyamboya/Nyikum, Nyamboya/Nyanjim, Kembam/Nyangiar (or Nyiyab/Kembam; see further below).
mat, thus obtaining the right to skin leopards (the most important criterion distinguishing chiefs from notables), as in the case of Nyamboya/Nyanjim (see also the discussion on Nyamecar/Nyatunji below). Creating floods to kill those who bring the back leg of game to other chiefs might also be seen as a trick, which also has several variants. For example, it is said that Nyambece let the back legs of cloven-hoofed game become rotten on purpose before bringing them to his chief Ngom. One day, Ngom became exasperated and threw a rotten leg in Nyambece’s face, thus giving him the right to keep the legs of that animal and losing this right for himself. There is also the case of Wanjang, who challenged Nyamakper in a competition regarding who would be the most successful in growing millet. Some say that Wanjang won through his magic, others that he won through trickery by giving boiled (i.e. sterile) seeds to his competitor.

Many of these characteristics overlap. For example, generosity goes together with being a great hunter and having good hunting magic. A trickster is often a criminal who is jealous of others and kills to gain power. Securing abundance through magical means also relates to sacred chiefship, which is common in the region (Adler 1979; 1982; Fowler 1993; Meek 1931; 1969; 1971).

As we can see, the way power is taken by one chief from another follows the outline of a few narratives, in which chiefs are presented either as generous, able to provide security and abundance, or as tricksters, magicians and murderers. These narratives are still used today to understand local political conflicts.

Before dying, the chief of one Kwanja village designated one of his sons to succeed him. But this son was working in Bankim and refused the post, saying that he had a big brother who could take it. His big brother was then nominated, but he did not remain long on the throne before dying. The son was then chosen again, but refused once more. He went into hiding in Yaounde for two months. The mayor sent a radio message asking him to come back, which he did, although he still refused the post. Someone else was nominated but did not remain more than two years on the throne before dying. The son then finally accepted the post. The day the cortège of official cars arrived in the village, with the sub-prefect, the mayor, and different Kwanja chiefs, they discovered that another chief had already been nominated in the village. Nyinjang, the notable responsible for the nomination, had preferred a local candidate (who happened to be his maternal uncle) to the son of the former chief, who had grown up in town and twice refused the position. The new chief refused to step down and sent the official
Cortege back to Bankim. Later on, a rumour spread that he had been sleeping with the wife of the former chief (i.e. the wife of his big brother, a joking partner) and that he did not bring him the back leg of cloven-hoofed animals (two of the strictest chiefly taboos).

In this account, the accusation of lèse-majesté is very serious and rests on the assumption that the culprit wished to become chief, i.e. that he killed the old chief in order to take his place, a scenario that is commonly expected of new chiefs and is well in line with former narratives of power seizure. Because of these events and rumours, the new chief is not taken seriously outside his own village. He was publicly mocked and humiliated by a Kwanja theatrical group in a well-attended development meeting, for example. Yet paradoxically this contributes to his legitimacy, since historical narratives present many Kwanja chiefs as illegitimate people who stole someone else’s power through murder, magic and trickery.

These narratives are also used to understand regional and national politics. The picture of the generous purveyor of meat or wealth is found in the historical traditions of many neighbouring groups (Adler 1979; 1982; Fowler 1993: 255; Muller 2001), including those describing the arrival of the Fulbe, who are said to have gained the support of the local population by slaughtering many cattle and distributing the meat. Modern political campaigns in which candidates distribute gifts to win the votes of the people can be seen as just another avatar of Kwanja chiefly generosity, referred to as the “politics of the belly” (Bayart 1993). The Kwanja rely on their political narratives to analyse the rumours of trickery and magical means through which competitors within the same party intrigue to climb up the hierarchy and be selected as the party’s candidates during elections.

Moreover, while these narratives are used to explain and legitimate existing political hierarchies, one can also try to manipulate them to challenge these hierarchies, as can be seen in the following example:

One Sunday morning, Nyatunji (a dignitary from a neighbouring village) visits me at home, and insists on being interviewed. He claims to have very important things to reveal to me. He is so pressing and serious that I decide to record the interview on tape in order to be sure not to miss any important information. When I start recording, he tells me the story of his ancestor. “A long time ago, Nyatunji was a leopard chief. Nyamecar
visited him and stayed for the night, sleeping on a leopard skin. The day after, Nyamecar claimed that since Nyatunji had given him the leopard skin, he would always keep it, and from that day on, hunters would have to bring the skin of all the leopards they killed to Nyamecar instead of Nyatunji”. Once his brief story is finished, the old man loses all interest in the interview, and it is impossible to get him to talk about any other topic. The interview ends, leaving me puzzled because the old man’s story does not seem that important to me, and is moreover in direct contradiction with what I had heard before. Nobody had told me that Nyatunji had been a leopard chief or that Nyamecar had won his power from Nyatunji. None of the many informants I asked later had heard of this story, and all claimed that it was not true.

I have other examples of single informants telling me narratives that were contradicted by everything I had heard before.\textsuperscript{58} When cross-checking with informants who had my confidence, this was deemed to be untrue and either grounded in ignorance or (more likely) motivated by a hidden political agenda. The scenario was always the same: one informant uses stereotypical narratives but reverses the commonly accepted hierarchies between chiefs, presenting today’s notables as former chiefs who had lost their power. Although this does not challenge the present hierarchies as such, it nevertheless supposes that these dignitaries could claim a higher fate on historical grounds. These stories were told to me in private interviews, and the informants who told them would probably not have dared to tell them in public. It is one thing to try and manipulate hierarchies with a foreign anthropologist who does not know them, but it is an entirely different matter to tell these stories in front of a chief who is defined as superior and will never tolerate suddenly being represented as having been subordinated to his notable in the past. These narratives are taken very seriously, as they determine local political hierarchies and control over territories.

Interestingly, the integration of people of Langa origin (Yeka, Twendi, Weri) into the Kwanja region is not associated with

\textsuperscript{58} For example, I heard from one informant that Nyiyab had obtained the status of a notable by tricking Kembam into greeting him by clapping his hands, although most informants told me that it was Kembam who had taken the power from Nyiyab. I also heard that Nyawangung stole Twama’s power by drowning him in a flood with his \textit{gwént’} magic, while everybody else told me that Twama had never been a leopard chief.
the narratives described above, even when the newcomers acquired territories and political titles in the process. Their arrival is always described in general terms, saying who made war against whom before making an alliance. This specificity could reflect their recent arrival in Kwanja territory following slave raids, as compared to other Kwanja stories predating the arrival of the Fulbe in the region. Or it could reflect another political culture (presumably Mambila) legitimising power in other terms than by reference to generosity, magic, murders and tricks. Matrilineal notables are also unconcerned by such narratives: their power has been acquired either through regular wars or through the purchase of a title or territory in exchange for a female member of the matrilineage.

Finally, the narrative structure of chiefly historical accounts is used to give meaning to a variety of political strategies in a variety of contexts, including the arrival of the Fulbe (who tricked the Kwanja by providing them with meat) or the “belly politics” of electoral dynamics (Bayart 1993). These narratives might even apply to national and international politics. Biya, for example, is believed to have tricked Ahidjo, making him believe that he was sick and about to die in order to take his place. Ahidjo, in his turn, is said to have tricked Nigeria in a complicated naval episode to take control over the Bakassi area. When politicians succeed in gaining the power, this is seen as the result of their quick-wittiness. Their power might be illegitimate, but in a way this illegitimacy is the very characteristics that legitimates them, since it conforms to local expectations of jealousy and competition among “brothers”. Just as sacred chiefs are held responsible for the welfare or misfortunes of their subjects, so President Biya is held personally responsible for the Nyos natural disaster of 1986 by a rumour claiming that the 1700 or so victims did not die because of the discharge of poisonous gas from the volcanic lake, but because the President allowed his French or American allies to try out a secret weapon on the local population. Finally, the reluctance of President Biya (one of the oldest and longest-serving presidents) to name a successor is locally understood as a typical strategy to protect himself against the possible impatience of the heir and/or to protect the heir from the jealousy and witchcraft of competitors.
Ethnogenesis

Anthropologists often explain ethnogenesis (or linguistic and cultural diversity) by using the model of the “phylogenetic tree” (see fig. 17). New groups, cultures and languages are seen as the result of kernels detaching themselves from a community, establishing a new chieftainship, growing in isolation from the original group, and slowly drifting apart from the original group until they acquire distinct (although closely related) homogenous characteristics. This is the dominant model used in linguistics to explain how dialects drift away to create new languages, as can be seen in fig. 17.

This model mirrors that of evolutionary biology and of genetic drift based on mutation and selection. It is commonly applied to cultural history and ethnogenesis as well, and it is striking, for example, to see that many ethnic maps in Cameroon or in Africa are, in fact, linguistic maps, as if socio-cultural distinctiveness could only exist along linguistic lines. The model of the phylogenetic tree therefore

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59 This model was kindly communicated to me by Sascha Griffiths, whom I thank for his help. More detail about the Mambiloid language tree can be found in Connell (2001).
tends to reproduce the old model of tribe defined as a linguistically, politically, culturally, geographically, and genealogically homogenous unit (we will come back to this point in the last chapter). As a first approximation, this model seems to fit with local history when it claims, for example, that the Bamoun or the Banso come from the Tikar, who themselves come from the Mbum (Jeffreys 1964; McCullogh 1954; Chilver and Kaberry 1971). It is also the model preferred by local historians when writing about the origin of the different socio-cultural groups in Adamawa (see, for example, Mohammadou 1986; 1990; 1991).

The problem with this model is that it is unable to conceptualise the integration of migrants, the merging of groups, ritual syncretism or the creolization of culture and language. The local historical accounts of the Kwanja are not about heroes leaving their homeland and founding a new chiefdom on their own, but rather of migrants meeting a group of autochthones and merging with them to a certain extent and along different trajectories. The phylogenetic tree is ill-suited to accounting for such dynamics.

Instead of seeing ethnogenesis as the result of fission and drift, Kopytoff (1987) has developed a model that sees it as the result of mixing and fusion. The focus is no longer on cultural centres that irradiate offshoots, but rather on the no man’s land at the frontier of established kingdoms that attract different marginals or adventurers (like a “magnet attracting scrap”) who mix and create a new society (ibid.: 5-6). Kopytoff predicts that authority in these groups is likely to be based on autochtony, the first-comers holding the dominant positions (ibid.: 16). However, the group being small, it welcomes foreigners and integrates them by giving them the positions of dignitaries or a fictive and hierarchical relationship of kinship (ibid.: 49-52). Instead of the model being based on the isolated, internal and independent change of a homogenous group, it is based on the syncretic merging of differences to create something new.

This “magnet” model seems well suited to accounting for Kwanja history and cultural diversity. Although it is difficult to see the Kwanja region as a real “no man’s land”, since every parcel of land is under the authority of a chief, there are (and were) large tracts of land empty of people and difficult to control. Moreover, there were no centralised power structures (no paramount chiefs). The Kwanja
region seems to have been a magnet attracting different kinds of foreigners: Langa or Mambila from the west, Tikar from the south and east, Bute from the east or north, Wawa from the north. On the other hand, few Kwanja are said to have migrated and integrated into neighbouring groups, except maybe Nyakong, who is head of a village mainly inhabited by Tikar, or a group of Kwanja who is said to have followed Bare invaders up to Bali (Mohammadou 1990; 1991; Chilver 1964: 10-11; Fardon 1988).

The Kwanja region does look like a melting pot, or rather several melting pots. What people describe as “Kwanja masks”, for example, have been brought by migrants from the Langa area. Some have kept their own dialects (Twendi), others lost them (Yeka, Weri). The wooden stick whose powder is used to cool anger and purify transgressions (another “Kwanja cultural trait”) is the monopoly of Wanjang, a chief of Tikar origin. The most important chiefs today (Nyamboya and Yimbere) are said to be of Bute origin. Yet, despite the great cultural diversity found among the Kwanja, most of them seem to share the same kinship system, possibly because of the many intermarriages that have occurred across the various groups. The result of these “melting pots” scenarios is a great mosaic in which one can hardly find two villages having the same combination of dialect, rituals, identities and geographical origin.

This diversity is also found at the regional level when comparing ethnic groups, raising the question of whether the “melting pot” model applies here as well. The “Tikar problem” constitutes a case in point. Several Grassfields societies claim to originate with the Tikar (Jeffreys 1964; McCullogh 1954), which is well in line with the philogenetic tree model. This claim has been questioned first on the basis of the small number of “Tikar” in the strict sense when compared to the high number of those claiming to derive from them, and secondly on the basis of the great cultural, political and linguistic differences between the Tikar and their “offshoots” (Chilver and Kabberry 1971; Fowler and Zeitlyn 1996). It has been suggested that this claim is political rather than historical in nature. “High status groups have historical links with Bankim. We are a high status group, therefore we have historical links with Bankim” (Fowler and Zeitlyn 1996:

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60 Bom, a notable of Kembam, is said to have a Wawa origin.
13). The “high status” or the fascination that they exert on their neighbours could be linked to their image of the “model tribe”, having a homogeneity that is hardly found in the Grassfields (ibid.: 15). Zeitlyn (1994: 41) has even argued that the Kwanja and Mambila are among those who have been fascinated by the Tikar and that they have adopted their model of chiefship (they have the same royal animals, and their words for “chief” are similar), although the Kwanja do not claim to be of Tikar origin and have successfully conquered some Tikar territory. One might therefore wonder why they would be fascinated by a population that they have dominated. Moreover, if the Kwanja chiefs are somehow sacralised, like Tikar chiefs, the sacralisation is not pushed very far and does not have the classic attributes of sacred kingship.

61 Except for the chief of Mbonjanga, or the Tikar of Kfwan.
62 The Tikar are the result of a fusion between Tumu autochthonous populations and Mbum migrants (Price 1979; Hagege 1969; Moummadou 1990). They used to control the part of the plain that is today inhabited by the Kwanja. The remains of the first fortified village of Bankim (“Kimi”) can still be found close to the Kwanja village of Yimbere. The kàŋmbì trees found in front of the chiefs’ palaces in Bankim and the former Bandam are said to have been planted by the Kwanja to mark the new boundary after their territorial conquest. Several informants (including Tikar) told me that it was to contain the Kwanja that the Tumu called on the Mbùm for help (see Hagege 1969: 17). Together, they pushed the Kwanja back further north up to Kongi. According to a local historian (Nyedjim, n.d.), this happened under the reign of Nguwa, between 1753 and 1813, which supports the argument that the Kwanja conquered the plain before the arrival of the Fulbe.
63 Sacred chiefs transgress some of the most important taboos of the society, practicing incest, cannibalism and/or murder. They thus become “sacred monsters” at the intersection between nature and culture, which allows them to tame natural powers for the benefit of society. But in case of natural catastrophe, or when they become sick or old, chiefs become scapegoats who must be sacrificed in order to re-establish the cosmological balance (see Heusch 1987; 1990). These characteristics of sacred kingship are, for example, found among the neighbouring Tikar, Jukun, Mundang and Wawa (Adler 1979; 1982; Gausset 1995; Meek 1931; 1969; 1971). The Kwanja chiefs may be said to be sacralized in that they are responsible for the health, wealth, abundance and peace in the village, or because of the respect that they enjoy, the taboo that surrounds using of their calabash or stool, the ritual treatment of their dead bodies and skulls, their symbolic association with leopards, the fact that they can take any young girl as a wife without paying matrimonial compensation, etc. But none of my informants knows of ritual cannibalism, incest, or the killing of chiefs among the Kwanja, even though a few of them are aware that this is practised among some of their neighbours.
Instead of postulating a “fascination for the Tikar” to explain why Grassfield societies claim to come from them while remaining culturally very different, one could solve the Tikar problem by adopting Kopytoff’s model. The claim to a historical connection might then be partly true, though only for chiefly lineages. Small groups of Tikar might have migrated into neighbouring communities, taking over power, but adopting the language, rituals, kinship structure and art of the host group, or creating something new by merging with them. A fascination for the Tikar might still have developed in parallel to this process, but one should be careful not to look for such a fascination where it does not exist or to equate the history of a whole group with that of its chiefs.

Conclusions

Chiefly histories are constructed along the lines of stereotypical narratives, but nevertheless they tell us something about who moved where and who gained power over which group. These narratives seem immensely important to the Kwanja with whom I worked, much more important than a Western audience would believe. Although it was not my primary interest, it was the single most important issue that my Kwanja collaborators wanted me to understand properly. I therefore had to spend much time trying to grasp the oral-historical details of each patrilineage.

Interestingly, the Kwanja are currently in a phase of the “re-invention of tradition” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1984), as they revive past titles that have disappeared for generations, in order to regain chiefly control over vast areas of the plateau that are being colonized by agricultural and pastoral migrants. The new chiefs are placed within hierarchies framed by existing narratives, and their nomination creates new conflicts in accordance with a traditional dynamics of struggles to control territorial resources and populations. This plays an important role in the cultural revitalization that is currently under way among the Kwanja and that is also found in other aspects than the political sphere (we will come back to this point in other chapters).
Power is constructed differently, according to whether it is patrilineally or matrilineally based. Patrilineal titles are characterized by conflicts, competition and jealousies (like relations between half brothers of the same father but different mothers), and by power being based on violence, fear and trickery, but also on an absolute (almost sacred) respect and obedience, thus reproducing the relationships that people have with their father. Matrilineal titles are characterized by the consensus, solidarity and collaboration found within matrilineages, and are thus extensions of the relationships that children have with their mothers. Modern politics, as well as national or global events, are themselves perceived and understood by the Kwanja in accordance with traditional politics and thus mainly with a patrilineal dynamics of power.

All this, of course, is my own construction of Kwanja politics. It is my judgement that sees stereotypical narratives where Kwanja informants see historical events, and that recognizes some historical validity to such narratives where other scholars would see none. This conclusion came progressively, by engaging with informants and chiefs. I became personally concerned by conflicts between chiefs and their brothers (some of whom were close friends), or by power struggles between neighbouring chiefs that brought a development project to a standstill because the chiefs controlling the sand or the wood that should have been used to construct a school had not given their approval. Last but not least, my thesis itself became an object of political struggle, and I had to confront attempts to manipulate the results of my research. All this was instrumental in my understanding of local politics.
CHAPTER 4

RITUALS

Rituals were, together with the oral history of the Kwanja chiefdoms, something that my assistants placed a great deal of emphasis on, encouraging me to witness all the ceremonies of the different groups of Kwanja. It took me years to acquire an overview of Kwanja rituals and to understand how they characterised different groups or patrilineages. The result shows, once more, that the Kwanja are not homogenous but are an aggregate of different groups with their own particular ceremonies. And yet, behind the diversity of ritual practices, one finds a few characteristics common to all Kwanja groups and to all rituals. This will lead to a discussion of the specificity and typicality of Kwanja rituals and of how a set of common structures can produce widely different formal outcomes.

Different ritual scales

To begin with, it should be said that most Kwanja rituals are either rituals for the dead or rites of passage, although the divide between the two should not be considered strictly, as rites of passages often imply some form of communication with ancestors, and as death is also a passage. There is a gradation in the different rituals that are practised, which will constitute the basis of our analysis. At the lower level, rituals are practiced individually. Someone organises a small sacrifice on his or her parents’ tomb, or to celebrate the birth of a child, the circumcision of a boy, a wedding or a funeral. These rituals are common as everybody organises them according to circumstances. During the months following the harvest, hardly a day passes by without an “individual” ritual being organised by someone in one of the Kwanja villages.

At a higher level, rituals are organised collectively by the patrilineage, whether ancestor cults or funerary rites. Although in
theory such rites should be organised every other year (during male years\(^6^4\)), they are rarer and may be organised only once in a decade, or less. They require the collaboration of the entire patrilineage and imply the attendance of neighbouring villages. The funerary rituals of some patrilineages are based on masquerades, the carved masks representing the spirits of the dead and of the ancestors. Collective ancestor cults used to imply the ritual washing of the dead chiefs’ skulls. Some of the collective ancestor cults also involve the use of auditory masks (bevelled reeds that distort the voices of the singers) representing the ancestors.

Finally, chiefly rituals are found at the highest level. They are the rarest and largest festivals to be organised. Chiefly rituals assume the model of funerary rituals, as they draw a parallel between the mourning of the dead chief and the enthronement of the new one. They imply the organisation of a collective ancestor cult that ritually treats the skull of the last chief and places it together with the skulls of the former chiefs. Twin rituals are seen as equivalent to chiefly rituals, but they are more common and much smaller.

In what follows, I will describe, on the basis of my own observations, examples of a birth ritual, ancestor cult, funeral and enthronement. I will then argue that all these rituals use the same symbolism and are structured in the same way, despite having formal differences and being at different scales.

\(^{6^4}\) The calendar is divided into “male years”, starting in the March of even years and ending in the February of uneven years, and “female years”, starting in the March of uneven years and ending in the February of even years. It is during male years that a certain kind of flying biannual termite (a local delicacy) swarms. Male years are said to receive more rain than female years and to be characterised by intense \(pywènt\) activities.
Birth rituals

A child is born in the village. It is a boy. Like most Kwanja children, he is born at home. The child and his mother are secluded inside the house until the umbilical cord falls off. Since it is a boy, his umbilical cord falls on the third day following the birth (it would have taken four days for a girl). The umbilical cord is buried under a banana tree or on the muddy bank of a river by a member of the child’s matrilineage in order to keep it fresh and cold, so that the body of the child remains in that healthy state. Before the mother and child go out of the house, a midwife presents the mother with the end of a spear. The mother touches it twice, then seizes it at the third attempt and steps out of the house. If the baby had been a girl, the midwife would have presented a stick to prepare couscous, and the mother would have seized it at the fourth attempt to step out of the house. When the mother steps out of the house, a car of the child (i.e. of his father) lets water run down the roof so that it sprinkles on the mother (see fig. 18). The mother then sits down surrounded by all the women present. She holds her baby wrapped in clothes. She then pretends to uncover her baby twice, actually doing it at the third attempt (the fourth for a girl). The uncovering of the baby is acclaimed joyfully by all the women present, especially by the members of the baby’s matrilineage. The midwife then drinks some palm wine and spits it in the face of the mother, while she holds her face in her hands, first in a “closed manner” (palms turned towards the face), then in an “open manner” (palms turned outwards). She puts a mix of oil palm and redwood powder on the child’s joints (knees, shoulders, ankles, etc.). While the guests eat cola nuts and drink palm wine, those who wish to do so go to the mother. They hold their hands against their faces while the mother sweeps ngvwámi leaves across their hands, first in a “closed manner” and then in an “open manner”. The mother then cuts three pieces of ngvwámi leaves and let them fall from their forehead. If two or three of the three pieces fall in an “open manner” (smooth face upward), it means that the person is at peace and will be lucky. The person picks the three leaves up with an arrow and puts them on the roof. He or she then takes a piece of charcoal and presents it to the mother, who seizes the other end, breaks it and throws it as quickly as possible at the person, who tries to do the same on the mother. The person who is quickest is supposed to find luck during the coming year. Someone attaches a necklace and/or a belt (made of any type of rope) to the baby, which he will keep until he walks, in order to protect him against hereditary witches. The parents cannot have any sexual intercourse until the child walks and is already strong, otherwise they will prevent the child from growing normally.
The birth of a child is one of the most frequent and simplest rituals. Yet it contains all the ingredients and principles found in other, more complex rituals – seclusion, symbolic elements, cər and ndiyndi as masters of ceremony, communication with the ancestors (in this case, in the form of divination), a danger of inversion requiring blessings, the following of taboos, or wearing protective devices.\(^6\) As in all other Kwanja rituals, there are many small

\(^6\) Weddings and circumcisions used to rely on the same structure and symbols as the other rituals described here. Today, however, they are no longer the object of important rituals. Circumcisions are done individually instead of collectively. Traditional weddings are no longer practised: a couple just moves together in a new house with-
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The *sùtì* usually refers to the sacrifice that everybody should make every year or every other year at the tomb of their parents to ask for their ancestors’ blessings. After the harvest, hardly a week can pass in a village without someone organising a *sùtì* and inviting the whole village to drink some maize beer (see fig. 19). The organisers brew beer and clear the tomb of the dead parent in whose name the *sùtì* is being organised.

A *car* of the deceased filters the beer, using her left hand three times before using her right hand, and spreads redwood paste on the legs of those who have organised the *sùtì* and on the legs of the *ndìglyndì*. The *ndìglyndì* brings two ceramic pots with him smeared with redwood paste, one containing normal maize beer, the other one containing unfiltered maize beer. The

out ceremony, although they might invite neighbours for a night of dancing to modern music.

66 To give just a few examples, if the child originates from the Langa area (Yeka, Weri, Tweendi), the umbilical cord is put close to a place where a certain type of ant lives. If the ants take the umbilical cord into their hole, it is a sign that the child will live long. In the past, when a Yeka baby was born, all the fires used to be extinguished in the village, and a new fire was made by rubbing two pieces of wood together. When the child of a man from Merka is born, the mother and father are not allowed to eat any food prepared on a fire until the day the umbilical cord falls. They can only eat bananas, papayas, fresh potatoes or manioc, etc. When the umbilical cord falls down and the mother leaves the house, the parents go to a crossroads and are presented with couscous on a rough raffia mat and sauce made of *kòriki* liana in a broken pot. They kneel down and take the food with their mouths, without touching it with their hands. They take a piece of couscous, dip it in the sauce, and throw it to their right. They repeat this, throwing it to their left. Then they do it again to their right. If the child is a girl, they do it a fourth time and throw it to the left again.

67 One can choose to honour people on the father’s side, the mother’s side, or both. When the *sùtì* is carried out in the name of many individuals, it is organised at a crossroads instead of a specific cemetery, and the matrilineage of each dead person is informed, so that it can participate in the *sùtì* and give some maize to be brewed for the sacrifice and the feast.
First pours some unfiltered beer on to the tomb with his left hand and spills some “cold” (i.e., unsalted and without chili) njāŋndi or crushed dried and spicy leaves on the tomb. He talks to the dead, asking for blessings: “As we do not forget you and give you beer, you should not forget us either and you should give us good luck in the fields, when hunting, when giving birth, and with anything that we try”. The ndīgnndi then distributes the filtered beer and “hot” dried leaves of njāŋndi with salt and chili to the people present. He opens a local cola nut (smaller and more bitter than imported cola nuts) and drops them from his chest on to the ground to see how they fall. If most of them stand in an “open manner” (inner side upward), it means that the deceased person is satisfied with the sacrifice and this is a good omen. If they fall in a “closed manner”, it means that the ancestor is not satisfied because his descendants have waited for too long before remembering him or her. The ndīgnndi then talks again, giving excuses, and asking for forgiveness and reconciliation, before throwing the cola nuts again and reading whether the ancestors have accepted the excuses and sent their blessings. People come back home, taking great care not to step on the foot of anyone else. In the afternoon, or the next morning, the whole village and all one’s relatives in neighbouring villages are invited to drink maize beer, then to dance. It is a cər who starts the singing and dancing.

**Fig. 19: Gathering of villagers to drink maize beer during a sūtī**

Sūtī can also be organised by chiefs, usually when there is a major problem in a village, such as a drought or an epidemic. Such
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sacrifices are larger than those organised by individuals. They are carried on the tomb of the dead chiefs’ skulls. The tomb is cleaned, beer is poured, and a ndíŋndí of the chief asks for blessings. Such chiefly súti used to imply washing the dead chiefs’ skulls with palm wine and smearing them with redwood powder. Due to skull thieves, 68 skulls are today kept buried.

In some patrilineages, collective or chiefly súti are accompanied by ndɔ̃bi (or njàrìbi), the bevelled reeds mentioned earlier that distort the voices of the people singing in them, made up into auditory masks that are said to represent the voice of the ancestors. They may also be produced at the end of a mourning period or an enthronement ceremony. The following describes an ndɔ̃bi ceremony organised by Nyagbe in February 1995, which followed a súti and a sòò (ritual wrestling; see below).

After rehearsing the songs in tibkà, the men come into the village and sing songs through bevelled reeds, asking for blessings, scolding villagers who have misbehaved, and insulting female genitals (“It has a mouth, red heavy lips; it has an eye that is long and black like a flute, it smells, it is filled with lice”, etc.). Women cannot see the ndɔ̃bi because they are made to believe that they are the spirits of the ancestors. The next morning, men go into the bush and dig a small hole to “kill the ndɔ̃bi”. Each piece of bevelled bamboo is cut in two lengthwise, starting with the “mother of the ndɔ̃bi”, which has some decorative incisions and is called kfiiri. The chief puts half of the split ndɔ̃bi down the hole, then puts the other halves on his forehead and drops them. If most of the pieces drop in an “open manner” (inner side upward), it is a good omen. If they fall in a “closed manner” (outer side outward), it is a bad omen. The chief buries all the ndɔ̃bi and closes the hole, asks for ancestors’ blessings, and pours some palm wine over the hole. He then takes some of the mud, mixes it with earthworm cast and smears some of it on the chest of all participants. The participants go back to tibkà to extinguish the fire with maize beer, then smear some of the muddy ashes on each calabash, pan or plate that has been used, so that they can be used again.

Ndɔ̃bi should be seen as part of larger rituals (súti, enthronement ceremonies) that build on the same elements as those

68 The theft of skulls seems to have been widespread in the past. There is a photograph of five skull thieves arrested in 1974 in Bankim and holding in their hands the skulls they had stolen in Beemster (1990: 47).
found in other Kwanja rituals, such as taboos, symbolism, the leadership of *car* and *ndîndî*, ritual inversions, divination and communication with spirits.

**Death rituals**

The most elaborate Kwanja rituals centre around death. Individual funerary rituals consist of three different steps: the burial, the inheritance and the end of the mourning period. The end of the mourning period is sometimes organised collectively and may involve masquerades.

**Individual mourning rituals**

The dead are buried with the head pointing towards the north. Men are buried on their left hand, looking in the direction of the east. Women, on the contrary, lie on their right hand looking in the direction of the west. When coming back from the burial, people should avoid stepping on anyone else’s foot.

The death and burial of an adult is followed by three or four days of general mourning. It is forbidden to make any noise in the village (dance, sing, shout, fight, etc.). People do not go to their fields. Before the burial, the widower and his first-born, or each widow and their first-born, provide a chicken. An *ndîndî* waves the chickens three times above a male corpse (*a car* waves the chickens four times over a female corpse). The spouses’ chickens are given to the matrilineage of the deceased, while the chickens provided by the children are given to the *ndîndî* or *car* of the deceased. These chickens are kept and will be given back with couscous on the day the mourning necklaces are cut.

Those who want to show their compassion (close friends, kin, members of the matrilineage, some *ndîndî* and *car*) shave their heads and wear a rope made of the bark of a banana tree. If the deceased was a man, the widow stays inside her house for three days (four for a widower), always in the company of a *car* or *ndîndî* of the deceased, including when they go outside to the toilet.

On the third day (the fourth for a widow), in the early morning, the ash and dirt of the house are swept up. The widows and all those who had worn a rope go to the river to wash.\(^{69}\) The *car* takes the widow by the

\(^{69}\) If the deceased is from the Ngissam trench or from Timbra, a *car* of the dead builds an arch with sisongo herbs, takes the widow by her hand, and makes her
hand, pretends to make her sit three times in the river and makes her sit at the fourth attempt. She then teaches her how to wash again (something which she could not do for three days). All those who had worn a rope of banana bark wash in the river. The cor of the dead cuts their rope and buries them in the mud of the river. The widow(er) is given a white or black cloth, which must be worn until the end of the mourning period. While guests are given food and drink by the matrilineage of the dead, the widow sits on a mat and has her head shaved by the cor of the deceased (widowers are shaved by an ndi ndi of the dead). The hair cannot touch the ground; it is kept in a leaf of taro which will later be buried in the mud by the cor of the deceased under the supervision of the matrilineage of the widow(er). When the widow is shaved, the cor of the deceased attaches a rope to her neck, made out of the bark of the kàymbi tree. She then teaches her three times how to cut grass with a machete, which the widow does herself at the fourth attempt. In the same manner, she teaches her how to use a hoe, a cooking stick, a harvesting basket, and how to put shoes on (all things which have been forbidden to her until now). Widowers, for their part, must re-learn how to cut the grass, how to use a hoe, a spear or a trap, how to put shoes on, etc.

After it is all over, widows and widower still have taboos to follow: they cannot sit on someone else’s chair or drink from someone else’s calabash. They cannot mix with people in a public gathering (if they want to buy beer in a pub, they send a child to do it for them). They cannot dance or run, and should refrain from going fast (on a motorcycle or in a car, for example). They are not supposed to talk out loud, joke, wear jewels, wash clothes (although today it is allowed), or cut or braid their hair. A widow cannot have sex. A widower can sleep with his other wives if he is a polygamist but cannot remarry.

A few months after the death, the matrilineage and the children of the deceased meet to organise a satigà (a word derived from the Fulfulde sadaka) and share the inheritance. The matrilineage of the deceased makes maize beer and invites everybody to attend the festivities, which last for one day. The next morning, the properties to be inherited are collected in the yard. A cor of the deceased uses her left hand and lwèrí leaves to sprinkle wàràn maize beer (a very light beer diluted with water) on the property and in the house to be inherited. The ndi ndi or cor in charge of the ritual is allowed to take one ob-
ject that belonged to the dead before the rest is inherited by the heirs and the matrilineage. They take a personal and valuable object, such as the deceased’s spear, knife, bow, hunting bag, cloth or hat for a ndiyndi or her cloth, knife, cooking pot or basket for a cor. A member of the matrilineage of the deceased then divides the inheritance among the children and the matrilineage.

The mourning period ends after the mourning necklace (kaara kàynmbi) is cut, which frees widows and widowers of all taboos. The matrilineage of the deceased, of his/her widow(er), and of the cor or ndiyndi in charge of the ceremony, collaborate to prepare a large quantity of maize beer and food. The night when the beer is fermented, a sùti is organized on the tomb of the deceased or at a crossroad, and the dance begins. In the morning, all the people who were mourning the deceased go to the river to be ritually purified.

A cor of the deceased washes the widows at the third attempt (a ndiyndi washes the widowers at the fourth attempt). The matrilineages of the widows and widowers give them new colourful clothes at the third or fourth attempt. The cor or ndiyndi then spit palm wine in the faces of those who have mourned and who hold their hands against their faces, first in a closed manner, then in an open manner (see fig. 20). Widow(er)s are smeared with red wood powder mixed with palm oil, and given couscous and chicken by the cor, which they begin to eat at the third or fourth attempt. People come back to the village, and the ndiyndi of the deceased start the dance. If the deceased was a man, his widow must pass a test to see whether they have respected the mourning period. The cor of the deceased place themselves in two rows with thirty metres between them. The widow is placed between two cor of the husband, and all three run from one row of cor to the other. The widow then “claps” the hands of the cor facing her, and they shake their feet (see fig. 21), whereby she re-learns how to run. If the widow falls down at that moment, it is a sign that she has spoilt the mourning period by transgressing the taboos. People dance until the beer is finished (up to three days and nights).

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70 A similar test consists in taking the beard of the deceased and keeping it in a reed until the kàymbi is cut. The beard is then taken and thrown into a calabash of palm wine. If the beard sinks (or if it has disappeared from the grass), it is a sign that the widow has not mourned seriously. If it floats, there is no problem.
In theory, widow(er)s should be freed from mourning after one or two years, during the dry season of a male year. All widows and widowers of the same patrilineage should be freed together, in a large collective ritual (described below). But today, the mourning period has been shortened to a few months, and the mourning necklace is cut individually during the *satigà* (the mourning ends at the same time as the inheritance is shared). The collective rituals are organised more irregularly, either to celebrate the deaths that have happened since the last ceremony was organised (even though most mourning has already ended years before) or, in some cases, to accompany an enthronement ceremony.
Fig. 21: Widows coming out of their mourning period and re-learning to run

Collective death rituals

Most Kwanja except the Ndek-Yi organise some sort of collective ritual to end the funerals of their dead. These rituals vary according to sub-group and patrilineage (see Table 3). In many places, during the night following the death, the satigà and the cutting of the kàŋmbì of an important person, an “animal” (nyèëmi) comes to cry in the village. This “animal” is said to be a leopard held by the tail and crying for the dead. It is in fact a friction drum. A man smears his hands with a slimy solution consisting of water mixed with jìŋjetà liana, and rubs a piece of jiřforì reed against the skin of a drum, thus producing shreeking sound.

Some groups of Kwanja organize a sóò during the night preceding the cutting of the kàŋmbì of an important person or of a collective death ritual, or (as well as during an enthronement or a ndʒòbì ceremony). The sóò of men consists in a ritual wrestling match that no woman can see.

When people arrive in tìbkà (the place of the ritual), they take their shoes and clothes off, remaining bare chested. They make a big fire and dance around it. The person who starts singing holds a branch of the mambùrù
tree in his left hand (holding it with the right hand would make him impotent) and must ask forgiveness three times before singing. Someone else holds a ᵃᵍʸʷᵃʳᵃ (the stick of notables which is made of interwoven buffalo straps) in his right hand. When he dances, he presents the ᵃᵍʸʷᵃʳᵃ to the people present. Anybody can seize it with the right hand and pull it violently or trip up the adversary to make him let go of it. Some participants can also wrestle with their bare hands, trying to make his adversary fall down and thus immobilise him. They sometimes find themselves in positions that are sexually suggestive, and insist on this aspect by humorously imitating coitus, or saying that the defeated man “is like the wife” of the winner. Everything happens in a macho atmosphere, but in a good mood. It is forbidden to bear grudges on the basis of anything that happens during the sòò, lest one should fall seriously ill. Even if someone is injured, nobody can complain: “Even if you kill your brother, you won’t be prosecuted tomorrow”. Before going back to the village, someone “kills the sòò”. The master of ceremonies throws the “fighting” stick in the bush while everybody shouts “waaarh” with disgust, waving it away. The master of ceremonies collects some earthworm casts, mixes them with maize beer, and puts some of the mixture on the navel and Adam’s apple of all the participants. Then he girds all participants with the branch used to sing the sòò and lifts each participant three times facing him, then three times facing away. People come back, avoiding stepping on the foot of the person in front.

The sòò of women takes place during female years and consists in singing licentious songs at night, possibly performed naked (according to some informants). Women go around the village behind a woman holding a torch and sing obscene songs describing male genitals (“It has an eye, two eggs, a beard”, etc.) or a sexual relationship (“It is as hard as a stick, it is painful when it enters, but we like it too much; we cannot sleep without having made love”, etc.).⁷¹ The men cannot witness the sòò of women (except for chiefs and the fathers of twins) for fear of becoming sterile.

Finally, some patrilineages organise masquerades that were introduced by people of Langa origin (Yeka, Twendi, Weri), and have been adopted by some of their neighbours. These masquerades vary according to the lineage (see Table 4). What follows describes a Yeka masquerade organised by Mewa in January 1995.

The festival starts between 5 and 7 pm. Three masks leave ᴱⁱᵇᵏᵃ and walk very fast towards the old village, accompanied by male villagers. These are

⁷¹ Mambila women have a similar ritual, in which they mimic coitus with obscene gestures (Zeitlyn 1994: 120).
“white masks” (sèrbì wàri) because they are anonymous and have no loincloth covering them and no wooden carving. Participants clean the old cemetery, and the notable directing the ceremony (a ndįngdi of the organiser) talks to the ancestors and asks for their blessings while pouring palm wine on the tombs and on the masks. The chief organising the masquerade then addresses the ancestors: “Please listen to my prayer and give us many boys because girls give birth in neighbouring villages and come back to wage war against us. So and so [he names some of the dead in whose name the masquerade is being organised], I ask peace from you. You died and left many children, but your daughters went elsewhere. If there is a war, your daughter’s children will fight against us. Everything we do in this cemetery, it is you who showed it to us. We are following in your footsteps, so please don’t abandon us. As it has been a while since we visited you, we have remembered you and we came to clean your cemetery so that you don’t live in grass and so that you give us peace, and so that the hot air passes above us and the cool air goes on us”. He then spits some palm wine on to the tomb. The organiser, the master of ceremonies, and some elders then blow whistles (made of bevelled reeds) and shout: “Oh Ooooh, Oh! Our enemies said that we were finished, but here are so and so (they name a few members of the patrilineage present). We are like ants; we die in the morning and are reborn in the evening. My children, go and ambush our enemies and catch them as we catch our chickens”. The master of ceremonies then takes three leaves of ngywàmì, puts them on the forehead of those who come in front of him, and drop them to see whether two or more fall in an “open way” (smooth side upward). People come back to the village and avoid stepping on the foot of the person in front.

Fig. 22 and 23: Tānimkösì (whipping mask with leaves only)
The next day, several Tanimkashiti (whipping masks with no wooden carving or loincloth, see fig. 22-23) start scouring the village from the early morning. They whip everybody on their way with the veins of palm leaves. Children are terrified. Women run away because they know that the masks are especially chasing them. The masks also have a stick with which to touch the food (taro, potatoes, manioc) or chicken they want to confiscate. Two male assistants follow each mask, take the confiscated food and chicken, and try to soothe the mood of their mask and repair what it destroys. After a few hours, everybody seeks refuge at home, inside the palace or in the fields, except people from the organising patrilineage, who are preparing the beer in a courtyard. When a whipping mask arrives, he is given some of what is being prepared (first the maize paste, then the grilled one, then the paste mixed with yeast, and finally the fermenting beer). The village looks dead until people come back in the evening, after the masks have gone back to tibkà to roast and eat their daily booty. This continues the following day.

On the third day, the whipping masks come in the morning, but leave the village in the early afternoon, just before the sèrbì enter it. They do not take the same path, since the two kinds of mask should avoid one another. As soon as the sèrbì enter the village, people come out of their houses to welcome joyfully the masks that represent the spirits of their lost parents (see fig. 24 for Yeka masks). Each mask wears a loincloth and a personal object of the dead person (necklace, watch) given by his or her matriline-
age, and a wooden carving (an abstract figure for commoners, a chiefly mask for a male or female notable or their spouses). They are led by a mask called sèrbi bwárbi, which has a long piece of bamboo to which feathers are attached (see fig. 25).

Fig. 25: Sèrbi bwárbi, leading the other masks

On the fourth day, the masks come again in the afternoon and visit different notables or the houses of the deceased persons, throwing some lwèrf herbs inside each house visited. Each mask should dance briefly on the tomb of the dead it is representing. A stone is placed on the edge of the tomb, which the mask touches with its left foot to make it fall down. On the fifth day, the kàymbi of recent widows and widowers who have not yet been liberated are cut. After cutting the kàymbi, a race is organised. The widow is given a head start of ten or twenty metres and runs home as fast as she can, without looking back (she cannot see the mask of her late husband). She is chased by the mask of her husband holding the spear or machete of the dead man. If the widow stumbles and falls down or if the mask is able to cut the shadow of the widow with the machete, it is a sign that she has not respected the mourning taboos and that she might soon die. Before the masks go back for good, the widow is blinded by a piece of cloth or a basket and meets the mask of her dead husband on the road for a last farewell.
Fig. 26: Nabi karabi: “couscous on bags” ending masquerades

The following day, dancing continues in the morning, this time with widows and widowers. In the afternoon, the “couscous of the bags” (nabi karabi) is prepared (see fig. 26). People dance briefly with the chickens that will be eaten, to which Tākayngā fruits are attached. A fire is made in the road, and the chickens are cooked on a broken pot, with a piece of bamboo as a spoon. The gizzard is split and cooked with the chicken’s beak inserted in it. The couscous is put on a “bag” made of woven palms, representing a coffin. Men bring the coffin of couscous to a crossroads that the masks have passed by. The carved masks are lined up and oiled with palm oil while men are eating. Someone then “kills the jimbâ”: the organiser takes the utensils used to prepare the food and throws them over his shoulder while everybody shouts “waaah”, waving them away. In the past, the elders would eat some small shrimps, fish and birds during this meal. People who had eaten this could no longer consume them in daily life, but only at the end of a masquerade.

The masquerade described above is characteristic of the Yeka and is one of the most elaborate among the Kwanja. Three other groups of Kwanja organise masquerades to end funerals, the main events of which are summarised in Table 4 below. When it comes to formal differences between carved masks, the masquerades of the Twendi do not have any whipping masks or white mask, just the masks representing the chief and the spirits of the recent dead. The wooden
carvings are similar to those of the Yeka, but they have another type of mask for the spirits of female commoners (the abstractly carved masks are just for male commoners), see fig. 27. The Weri masks are almost similar to those of the Yeka, but have only one white mask coming out between the whipping masks and the masks of the dead, wearing an abstract wooden carving to which is attached a long piece of bamboo with feathers (it is a Sèrbi bwârbi). When the Bung organise a masquerade, only one chiefly mask comes out. Finally, for Nyaku, there are no whipping or white masks, just one leaf mask (without wooden carvings) for each spirit of the recent dead, plus one mask for the chief (with the same carvings as the chiefly masks of other groups). These masks are called Tåmbâhâ; they have a white skullcap consisting of a sticky maize flour paste. The widows can dance with the mask representing their late husband. The masquerade ends when the masks suddenly run back into the bush, and everybody throws seeds at them (maize, groundnuts, small taros, etc.) in order to have success in farming the coming year if their seed touches a mask.

Fig. 27: Masks (sèrbi) of the Twendi
Fig. 28: Masks (sèrbi) of the Weri
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ritual Description</th>
<th>Nyandung</th>
<th>Nyasunda</th>
<th>Twendi</th>
<th>Yeka</th>
<th>Weri</th>
<th>Bung</th>
<th>Tikar of Kfwan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Ndëbbi</em> and <em>Nyáràbbi</em> - licentious songs and ancestors' songs in reed</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Sòdò</em> - licentious songs for women and wrestling for men</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Nyëdòmmi</em> (&quot;animal&quot;) Friction drum</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Tànîmksòbbi</em> Whipping masks with leaves (fig. 22-23)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Sërbì wòri</em> (&quot;white mask&quot;) and/or <em>Sërbì bwàròbbi</em> (leading other masks, see fig. 25)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Sërbì</em> Carved masks for the spirit of the dead and chiefly masks (fig. 24, 27, 28)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>One chiefly mask only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Tànbbàgbà</em> - Masks of leaves for the dead and one chiefly mask</td>
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<td><em>Nabi karabì</em> - &quot;couscous on bags&quot; ending the masquerade (fig. 26)</td>
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Table 3: Special death rituals practised by the different Kwanja groups when cutting the *kàngmbì* and ending a mourning period.
Enthronement ceremonies

Chiefly enthronements consist of three ceremonies that parallel the three steps of mourning rituals for commoners. A chief’s acclamation, taari and bani correspond to the first days of mourning, the satigà and the kàngmbì that follow the mourning of a dead.

In the past, when the chief died, his death was kept secret for a few days, until the notables had chosen the new chief. The new candidate had to circle the body of the dead chief three times and swear that it was not him who had killed the chief, and calling a
deadly curse down upon himself if he lied. After the new chief had been chosen and nominated, the death of the former chief was made public, allowing people to start beating the drums with the rhythm of war and making the “animal” cry. The body of the dead chief cannot go through the door but has to come out of the house through a window or a hole made in the back wall (or, today, through the back door). Commoners, especially women, should not see the dead body of the chief. The chief is buried in a sitting position, dressed in white, in the collective tomb of all his predecessors. The tomb is oriented along a north-south axis, with the opening on the western side. The chief faces east, and his head is supported by a forked piece of wood, so that his head falls in the direction of west, in an “open” manner. If his head were to fall towards the east, it would bring a curse down on the villagers. When coming back to the village, those who have buried the chief cannot step on the feet of those in front of them. Once the new chief has been chosen, he is secluded in a small straw hut, where he is given a temporary mourning necklace, belt, bracelets and anklets to mourn the dead chief. His notables, neighbouring chiefs and ndįŋndį chiefs come to “pierce his eyes” with medicines (allowing him to see spirits) and teach him all the “secrets of the chiefdom” (who owns or practises what type of witchcraft and black magic, etc.). Once he comes out of the hut, he is given a bag containing some regalia (buffalo tail with cowries, bracelets, etc. See fig. 15 and 30). In the past, the new chief and his female notables used to mourn the dead chief, just like widow(er)s, until the a`¿m ceremony. Today, the mourning ropes are only worn for one day, then cut, kept in a safe place, and worn again during the taɔri and the bānì that officially end the mourning period of the chief and his female notables.

The taɔri is normally organised a few months after the burial. It corresponds to the satigà and transfers power from the first notable (acting as regent) to the chief. The chief is made to sit on his throne or on the leopard skin, and is given all his regalia and the ndṳŋgĩnì (the wooden stick whose powder ends a fight or transgression likely to bring a curse). It is normally during the taɔri that the skull of the dead chief is transferred to the collective tomb for skulls. The bānì ends the chief’s mourning and frees him of all restrictions. Today, the
Enthronement ceremonies

The following example took place in January 1995 for the enthronment of Nyinyem (a notable of Nyawara).

One week before the ritual starts, the animal (friction drum) starts crying in the environs of the village. Three days before the enthronement, the notable is secluded in a straw hut with cérkibí lianas worn as necklace, belt, bracelets, anklets, and slung over both shoulders. He remains bare-chested. The notable is very well fed; he must refrain from any sexual relations. His fellow notables and the members of his matrilineage do not leave him alone but accompany him even when he needs to go out to relieve himself. No villagers can see him, and he is not supposed to see the sun.

The day before he comes out of his seclusion, one chiefly mask (sèrbí) comes into the village. The mask represents the spirit of the dead notable. Later, during the night, the notable comes out of his hut and washes in the river. Someone who has already organised a bâni (whether a chief, a notable or a father of twins) cuts all the lianas he is wearing as a necklace or bracelets, and a member of his matrilineage buries them in the mud of the river. The master of ceremonies leads the chief three times under a sisongo arch planted in the river, which the chief must not touch. The notable then sits in the water at the third attempt, and the father of twins pours water over his back. The notable’s assistant collects the water in his hands and
drinks it. The notable is then offered new clothes by his matrilineage, and he is smeared with redwood powder mixed with red oil. The matrilineage gives a chicken or some money to the master of ceremonies for cutting the rope. People then beat drums and walk slowly to the village. The chief is closely surrounded by men holding a mat above his head. The group of people turns three times around the stone throne, then make the chief sit there. After this, women come out of their houses and greet the notable joyfully. While most people start dancing in the village, a group of men goes out of the village and starts a sóò in tìbkà (the place of the ritual). In the morning, neighbouring chiefs and notables start arriving. Villagers hide all their chickens inside their houses, as they know that people can steal them with impunity during the ritual. When many people are gathered, the tìsànàbì (war dance) begins.

Once a chief has completed the bānì, he is now fully respected. His subjects are supposed to show him great respect (remaining silent while he drinks, kneeling down when talking to him, etc.), and he can be buried in a sitted position. Some say that if a chief dies without organising his bānì, his spirit cannot find rest in the trench and is doomed to wander endlessly on earth. Despite this saying, few of the current Kwanja chiefs have organised a bānì, partly because of the cost of the ceremony.

Fig. 29: Parents of twins undergoing ritual washing, while a ndîngdì passes three times under an arch in the river with a twin in his arms.
The parents of twins are considered to be like chiefs. When the twins are weaned, their parents organise a hâni that is, in many ways, similar to the one described above for the chief (“animal”, seclusion, war dances, purification, passage under an arch in the river – see fig. 29). No carved mask comes out, but there are three acoustic masks: the animal, the kibiibi (reed whistles imitating the crying of twin babies, some of them being blown in water) and the “mother of twins” (a rhombus said to be the mother comforting the crying twins). Parents of twins can wear red feathers and drink from the calabash of chiefs, but cannot sit on a throne or be buried seated.

**Common characteristics of Kwanja rituals**

Behind the great diversity of ritual practises, one finds a few principles, always the same (relating to kinship, symbolism, communication with the hereafter, and people’s identity), that run through all Kwanja rituals and characterise them, regardless of their scale or frequency.

**Kinship**

The ritual practices that each person undergoes are determined by his or her patrilineage.\(^72\) When undergoing or organising a ritual, people can count on the help of the members of their matrilineage, who will provide most of the food and drink required and will take precautions to protect the health of their members. For example, they are present when car or ndiyndi attach or cut the mourning necklace, when they bury it in the mud, when they shave the head of a widow(er) and bury the hair in the mud of a river. The matrilineage is the first social body to benefit from a ritual, the first to cry or rejoice, according to the context. All rituals are directed by a master of ceremonies who cannot belong to the patrilineage organ-

\(^72\) In some cases, it may be determined by the patrilineage of the spouse. I have, for example, seen a Twendi masquerade include a mask for the dead wife of a Twendi, even when the widower had already gone through the death rituals organised by the deceased wife’s patrilineage.
ising the ritual, but must come from one of its allied patrilineages. Nothing can take place without a cər or a ndiynći. It is they who attach mourning ropes, cut them, sacrifice chicken to ancestors, lead the sòò, organise masquerades, etc. Thus, rituals only exist because of the collaboration of all the most important social groups. One could therefore say that religious practices reinforce the social cohesion of lineages and society (Durkheim 1912). But one should go a step further and describe the different roles played by the social groups which have conflicting interests. For example, when the head of a patrilineage asks for the blessings of ancestors during a ritual, he specifically asks for “many boys, because girls marry elsewhere and their children come back to make war against us”. Although matrilineages are the basis of social solidarity, they constitute a threat to patrilineages and patrilocal residence.73

The different ritual roles played by matrilineages and patrilineages are well captured by a myth explaining the origin of masquerades.

Two sons of a chief were half-brothers by different mothers. They went hunting, and their dog chased after a palmist rat, which hid in a large burrow or cave. The two brothers pursued the rat into its hole but lost it. When they tried to come out, they found that the way out was blocked by a big rock that had fallen down behind them. The dogs had stayed out of the hole. They barked, and villagers found them there. They tried to move the rock but failed. The brothers were trapped and had to be fed from outside. The little sister of one brother fed him by putting food directly into his mouth. But she did not feed the second brother, since he had a different mother. The second brother had lost his mother and had no brother and sister of same mother to take care of him. He was starving, although he was eating what was left from the food of his half-brother. The hole inexorably filled itself in, and before it was totally closed, the brother without matrilineal relatives summoned all villagers. When they arrived, he explained to them how to prepare masks and to organise his funerals, and he taught them the jimbù song (the song of the masks), whose words are like this (in

73 Wars are usually territorially based and are therefore patrilineally defined. Yet, it is unthinkable to kill the members of one’s matrilineage. This has led to matrimonial strategies encouraging marriage within the village or neighbouring villages (cər and ndiynći, for example).
Yeni): “I have no mother, I have lost my parents, I will die alone.” I am dying of starvation because I have no brother and sister. If I had some, I would die with a full stomach”. The next morning, the hole was completely blocked. The chief organised the first masquerade to celebrate their funeral, and this has continued since then.

When the Yeka and Weri organise a masquerade, the leading mask represents the orphan prince. This mask is distinct from the others (it has a piece of bamboo with feathers), is anonymous (it has no loincloth given by a matrilineage) and it is not given any food during the masquerade because it has no matrilineage to take care of him. In the very myth of origin of masks, patrilineages and matrilineages are defined as the central actors of masquerades, as patrilineages organise rituals to replace an absent matrilineage that is unable to fulfil its duties. This antagonism between organising patrilineages and benefitting matrilineages is present in every Kwanja ritual.

**Reciprocity**

The logic of the gift and of reciprocity is central to all rituals. It is, for example, the cornerstone of sacrifices to the ancestors. They are given beer and chicken and are asked for fertility and good luck. They are remembered so that they remember the living in return. If, on the other hand, the ancestors feel forgotten, they might also forget the living and let them down. This can bring death, drought or famine, which will then trigger new sacrifices to the ancestors. Remembering and forgetting are also central elements of mourning. The widow(er) has to remember the deceased (and follow mourning taboos) for as long as its spirit wanders around and haunts him or her. After a few months, however, life must go on. The spirit of the deceased must go to its trench at the same time as the widow(er) must forget about him or her. The presence or absence of the spirit in the village must be reciprocated by its remembering or forgetting by the widow(er). Any imbalance in the reciprocity brings misfortune (Gausset 2001a). If the widow(er) forgets the deceased while

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74 Bruce Connel (1995) interprets this story and the words of the song as a metaphor of the death of the Yeni dialect, which only survives through the words of the *jimbà* song.
the latter’s spirit is still around, he or she will become mad and be spiritually haunted forever. The same happens if a widow(er) refuses to let go of his or her sorrow and continues to mourn after having been freed.

Ritual duties are reciprocated on many different levels. First, members of a patrilineage must organise each other’s funerals. Second, members of associated patrilineages (čor and ndîyndî) must lead one another’s funerals. Third, matrilineages associated in a njáni relationship must perform operations for the other when someone dies with a swollen belly (see the next chapter). Fourth, members of the matrilineage must mourn one another, and contribute food and drink when one member undergoes a rite of passage. Fifth, spouses (and their matrilineages) must mourn one another. The four first types of reciprocity are quite general. I help or mourn others because they will help or mourn me. The fifth type, however, is much more specific and closely watched. A widow(er) must mourn his or her dead spouse, and the matrilineage of the widow(er) will contribute food and drink. But when it is the turn of the widow(er) to pass away, the matrilineage of his dead spouse must mourn and reimburse exactly the same quantity as was originally given by the matrilineage of the widow(er). A close account of things given during the first funeral is kept, and they must all be returned when the second spouse dies. A member of the matrilineage of the first deceased must mourn fully the death of the spouse. One often chooses a small child or an old lady no longer having an active sex life and who therefore has fewer problems in playing the role of a widow(er) and following the strict and full mourning taboos. The alliance contracted through a marriage only ends after the death of both spouses. Likewise, reciprocity is central when widow(er)s and their first-born give chicken to the matrilineage and čor or ndîyndî of the deceased, or when the organiser of a masquerade gives a

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75 When a chief dies, one of his čor and ndîyndî will tie and cut the kàngmbì mourning necklace, as happens for commoners. But when it comes to enthronement, it is a specific ndîyndî chief or notable who directs the ceremony (the definition of ndîyndî differs according to commoners and chiefs). Such work is usually reciprocated. For example, Nyayimber nominates the new Nyaku, and Nyaku nominates the new Nyayimber. Nyawangung nominates Nyamecar, who nominates Nyawangung, etc.
chicken to each matrilineage of the deceased. These chickens must be returned with food and drink the day the mourning period is ritually ended. Giving a chicken to a certain group creates an obligation to “return” it by helping in preparing the food for guests in a future ceremony.

Thus, reciprocity is a crucial component of all rituals, from the simplest to the most complex. One has obligations towards others, and these are reciprocated. The duty to help allies (and pay them back) might partly account for the survival of Kwanja rituals, despite slave raids having decimated and dispersed all villages.

*Communication with ancestors and reversals*

Interaction with spirits is a central part of rituals, although it is staged more explicitly in collective and chiefly rituals than in individual and commoners’ rituals. At times of birth or death, for example, spirits cross the boundary between the spiritual and the human world to be progressively fixed either in the human world (at birth) or the spiritual world (at death). Communication with ancestors also takes the form of gifts and counter-gifts (prayers, offerings, blessings), consulting oracles, taking oaths (swearing that one is innocent of a supposed crime) or direct communication when interacting with visual or auditory masks representing the spirits of the deceased and of ancestors. The masks intrude into the world of the living either to advise people how to behave, to say a last farewell to their spouses and twin children, or to endorse the enthronement of their successor.

Rituals usually take place near tombs, crossroads, lakes, springs, rivers, ravines, caves, doorsteps, arches, i.e. in places marking a transition between two worlds (inside-outside, upstream-downstream, underground-above ground, aquatic world-terrestrial world) and are characterized by the presence of spirits. Or else rituals start in places called “tìbkà”, which are created for the occasion in a straw hut or simply in the bush or forest. These places constitu-

76 The story of the two half-brothers who invented the masks and who disappear progressively in a tunnel can be seen as a metaphor of the journey taken by the spirit of the dead.
te an antichamber to the spiritual world. It is from there that ancestors come out of their world to intrude into the human world. Communicating with the spiritual world is not free from danger; it opens a breach in the cosmological order and brings deregulation, mixing two worlds defined in opposite terms. The spiritual world is a mirror image of the human world, in which things are reversed (left is right, food is tasteless and poorly cooked, etc.). Along the same lines, the intrusion of spirits or bush creatures (such as the “animal”) into the human world is characterised by a reversal of the profane order. One uses tasteless food, and one uses the left hand to filter beer for the ancestors, to pour it on to tombs, to sprinkle the property of the dead before inheriting it, or to hold certain leaves when singing a sóò. The tánìmkòtí (representing wild and anonymous bush spirits) that invade the village and whip its inhabitants to force people to seek refuge in the bush reverse the normal order of things. Rituals are characterised by lawlessness. During a bānì, for example, anybody can steal any chicken that he or she can catch without being prosecuted, which forces people to keep all their animals and other property locked up inside. Likewise, tánìmkòtí can steal with impunity any chicken and food they can find. Moral and social rules are also reversed. Men (in njáràngbì) and women (in their sóò) sing obscene songs, depicting sexual organs or relations in crude and insulting terms. When women practise their sóò, men believe they go naked about the village, which is against all conventions. During the men’s sóò, social difference is abolished for the wrestling, and one can fight, wound or kill accidentally an elder, a notable, a brother or an in-law with impunity.

Even when a ritual implies no lawlessness, the simple fact that it is characterised by some form of boundary crossing (the intrusion of ancestors in the village or of villagers in sacred places, the passing of one status to another) disturbs the profane and common order of things. To avoid total anarchy, a new order is sought, with new rules and taboos that must be strictly followed (sexual abstinence, food taboos, avoiding stepping on someone’s foot, apologising three times before singing a sóò song, etc.). Rituals can contribute to the restoration of life and fertility, but they are also dangerous periods that can lead to death, madness or sterility if their specific rules are not followed properly. Those in a liminal state
must avoid certain foods (red meat, spicy foods), places (tombs, wells, rivers, public spaces), times (dawn, dusk, noon, midnight, full moon) and people (menstruating women, newborn babies, widow(er)s, chiefs), thus avoiding all things characterized by a classificatory ambiguity or boundary crossing (Gausset 2002a). Following these rules is also aimed at avoiding witches or sorcerers exploiting a mistake to kill the wrongdoer with impunity, the death being seen as the result of the transgression of a taboo rather than of sorcery. To prevent this, chiefs curse in advance anybody who might take advantage of such a situation. Moreover, matrilineages follow their members closely during the liminal period to protect them from malevolence. Anti-witchcraft magic is also used against the chiefs and dignitaries undergoing a rite of passage, to make sure that they have not killed their predecessors to gain his title.

Such reversals cannot last forever and must be ended when the ritual is finished. The jimbà and the ndôôbi must be “killed” or “buried” (i.e. sent back to the spiritual world) once they have passed on their messages. The utensils that have been used must be broken, buried or thrown away and waved into the bush, or else they must be treated with cast from earthworms (another mediator between the underground and above-ground worlds) and ashes (possibly symbolising consumption/end, or cooling down, or else a mixture of categories). After the communication has been cut at the end of collective rituals, it can still be re-established whenever people perform a sacrifice to their ancestors. The sùti allows the living to keep open a channel of communication with the dead even after funerals have ended.

**Tombs and wombs; death and rebirth**

Most rituals are linked to the cycle of death and rebirth, in several ways. People’s lives are, of course, characterized by birth, growing into adulthood and death. But each of these events is symbolically understood as a process of death and rebirth in passing from one state to another. Rites of passages are generally characterised by a social separation (seen as a symbolic death), followed by a liminal phase (seclusion akin to a symbolic gestation) and a reintegration (or re-
birth) into society under a new status. Moreover, the death of someone involves rebirth as a spirit in the outer world, and vice versa. Likewise, sūti rituals connected with the annual agricultural cycle also build on the symbolism of rebirth – rain and agricultural fertility being associated with human fecundity – in a reciprocal exchange with the spiritual world.

Tombs and wombs are the primary channels of communication between the human and spiritual worlds, allowing new spirits to be reborn into children, and old spirits to go back to where they came from and thus complete the cycle of life and death. The different places where rituals are organised, which are characterized by boundary crossing, can be seen as metaphors of tombs and wombs. For example, houses (or straw huts for seclusion) are used to control the passage between life and death, the spiritual and human worlds, one state and another, and they can metaphorically be compared to both wombs and tombs. A baby coming out of a house goes symbolically through a second birth (exposure to light, washing with water, the naming ceremony). Similarly, the seclusion of mourners, the parents of twins and new chiefs and their passing under arches in rivers builds on the same symbolism of gestation and rebirth. Conversely, a body in a house is already symbolically in the tomb (a chief’s corpse cannot go through a door but must go through a broken wall; it must be buried secretly, at night, without witnesses).

The parallel between tombs and wombs is made clearer when considering chiefly funerals. Chiefs’ tombs have the form of a womb that communicates with the surface by means of a shaft that can be likened to a uterus. A cord is sometimes attached to the hand of the chief and emerges on top of the tomb to allow the widow, who did not witness the burial, to touch their husband one last time before saying her farewell. Just as the umbilical cord links the child with the outside world and falls off after three or four days, the cord attached to his corpse is the only link between the dead chief and the living and allows the widow to say farewell to her late husband after three days of seclusion. And just as a child’s spirit needs to be fixed progressively in its body, so the skull (or spirit) of a chief needs to move progressively to its trench, first falling westward, like the sun, then being transferred to the skull shrine in its trench. When considering the enthronement of the new chief, the parallel with the new-born continues.
The chief, like a new-born baby, is protected by sexual taboos while being secluded for three days before being allowed to come out. Like umbilical cords, mourning ropes are cut after three or four days and buried in the mud of a river. Both chiefs and newborn babies need to gain in strength before being exposed to light and facing the village. Both are purified by water, acclaimed by the crowd who welcomes them, and anointed with palm wine, red powder and palm oil.

Chiefly enthronement rituals are explicitly compared to mourning rituals: a chief must mourn his predecessor before being enthroned. Chiefly rituals are therefore a more elaborate form of commoners’ death rituals, using the same structure and symbols, but in a symbolically more explicit way than for commoners. The intervention of the spiritual world in the world of the living is much more explicit when a chief dies, with leopards crying and masquerades representing the dead chief’s spirit. The ambiguity or reversals are much stronger than is the case with commoners’ deaths (sòò, lawlessness of the bənì, ending all activities in the village until the new chief is nominated, etc.). Moreover, the suspicion of witchcraft and sorcery that surrounds any death is dealt with systematically when it comes to the death of chiefs through oaths and anti-witchcraft practices. The parallel between tombs and wombs found in commoners’ rituals is therefore much clearer in chiefly rituals.

Symbolism

All Kwanja rituals play on a limited number of recurrent symbols. In a liminal phase, people should wear ropes on their joints (necklaces, belts, bracelets, anklets), both to protect themselves against witchcraft, and as a way of marking their ambiguous status and their respect for taboos. People coming out of a seclusion and being “reborn” in a new status are usually smeared with redwood powder and red oil on their their legs or joints, i.e. the places of transition between body parts such as the forehead, fontanel, neck, Adam’s apple, navel, shoulders, elbows, wrists, hips, knees and ankles. The red paste is also smeared on most sacred objects, such as the throne, the necklace of leopard teeth, the pot used to sacrifice beer to ancestors, masks, or the power stick of notables made of a buf-
falo tail or of woven buffalo skin straps. Red is also a colour associated with chiefs, since they are the only ones who are allowed to wear the red feathers of the gòrì bird.77

Most rituals try to reach an “open state”, whether in blessings, when palm wine is spat on closed then open hands, or in divination, where things presenting themselves as “open” are seen as a good omen. Coming out of seclusion is characterised by progressive “openness” and exposure to light. Openness is also a social value when it means that people have nothing to hide, no bad feelings in their hearts, no jealousy or anger. Freshness also has a positive value associated with health, peace and blessing. One spits palm-wine to bless someone or something. Ancestors create springs to answer prayers favourably to. Water is allowed to fall on to new mothers coming out of seclusion. Precautions are taken to keep liminal persons cool and fresh, avoiding exposure to the sun, avoiding “hot” and spicy foods, abstaining from sexual relations, from activities that may “heat” the corpse, or from contact with “hot” and polluted or ambiguous people (Gausset 2001a; Gennep 1909). Purification is done in rivers. Umbilical cords, circumcision belts, hair or necklaces that are cut at the conclusion to rites of passage, as well as the arch under which people pass, are buried in the mud of a river or under a banana tree to be kept cool and maintain the health of the person undergoing the rite of passage. During a birth ritual, people compete with the mother to throw a piece of charcoal in order to remain cool and gain luck.

All rituals associate the number three with men and four with women, when determining the time of seclusion or the number of attempts to be made before doing something, or even the number of days that it takes for the umbilical cord to fall off. In general, the left is associated with women, who are, for example, buried on their right hand facing west in order to keep their left hand free and ready to prepare couscous in the evening. The right is associated with men, who are buried on their left hand facing east in order to kept their right hand free to seize a spear and go to war in the morning. Men serve beer with their left hand in order to keep their right hand free to defend themselves. In churches, women tend to sit on the left.

77 Red is often associated with transitional states, in Cameroon as elsewhere in Africa (Jacobson-Widding 1979).
side, while men sit on the right side. When a child learns to walk and limps on its left foot, it is said that the leg of the mother is heavy, and she has to give some money to her child, touching the child’s leg with it, to make it walk properly (her husband would touch the right leg with the money). When someone transgresses a taboo (kpârî) that brings down a curse on his or her matrilineage, the chief uses his left hand to sprinkle wâràn beer diluted with water and palm wine on to women, while he uses his right hand to sprinkle men. In other contexts, the left is also associated with dirt, bad omens or insults. People (women especially) are supposed to wash their private parts with the left hand and to use the right hand to eat. Some notables hold things with their left hand to announce a bad omen as the result of a divination. People use their left hand to insult their joking partners when shaking hands with them or drinking the first or last beer of a ceremony. In a ritual context, however, the left takes on another meaning when dealing with ancestors, as it constitutes one of the aspects of ritual reversals (see above). A corro uses her left hand to start filtering the beer used in a sûtì. An ndiynedi uses his left hand to pour such beer on to a tomb or at a crossroads. During a sôò, men must hold a branch of mambûrû in their left hand. A mask uses its left foot to push a stone off its own tomb. In the ancestral or spiritual world, which is a mirror image of the world of the living, ancestors use their left hand and foot when the living use their right ones. Spirits have also an inverted taste when it comes to food, as they prefer food that stands between the raw and the cooked, that is, badly roasted or half-raw chicken, badly cooked couscous, unsalted or unspiced (i.e. “cold”) food, unfiltered beer, food prepared without utensils (roasted on a fire) or with broken utensils. The utensils are marked by ambiguity. At the end of the ritual, they are either broken, thrown in the bush and waved away, or treated with earthworm casts and ashes mixed with beer before being re-used.

Identity

A key aspect of Kwanja rituals is their great diversity according to group and patrilineage (see Tables 1-5). Practising a ritual often im-
plies the re-enactment of a specific territory and history, ritually wandering and mapping a patrilineally defined landscape of tombs, old villages, trenches, boundaries between territories, and other sacred places. Interestingly, informants from all four groups of Kwanja that have carved masks told me almost the exact same story to explain their origins. One major difference, however, is that each group locates the cave where the event took place on their own territory. According to my informants, the exact same story would have repeated itself in four different places (on the territory of Nyawangung, Tiwer, Ndem-Ndem and Nyaku). Territorialising rituals and their mythical origins reinforces the role they play in defining people’s identities.

Although masquerades are organised by fewer than half of all Kwanja groups, they are increasingly regarded as epitomizing “Kwanja culture”, partly because nearly all Kwanja chiefs use at least one chiefly mask during their enthronement ceremony. Masquerades are now also organised during secular events, such as some general assemblies of the Kwanja development association, the rallies of political parties or the visits of a high-ranking state official – such as the visit of President Ahidjo in Banyo in the 1970s (Gausset 2005b). Such masquerades show the support that the group as a whole (and its ancestors) demonstrates for a given purpose or person.

Kwanja rituals are practised for two main reasons – their efficacy, and the role they play in defining patrilineal identity. First, it is necessary to maintain the good order of the world and prevent misfortune (see the next chapter). Forgetting ancestors can bring drought and bad luck; disregarding mourning taboos and rituals might make people go crazy. Errors in chiefly burials can bring curses. But even if this reasoning is still important, it is slowly losing ground in face of Christianity and Western education. Taboos are not as strictly followed as before, and there have been major changes in the organisation of chiefly rituals. Secondly, people claim to organise rituals for the sake of upholding a tradition that they have inherited, an aspect that is emphasised in some of the words addressed to ancestors. This claim is partly incorrect, because rituals have clearly been adopted and then transformed by different patrilineages, which has resulted in a great ritual diversity. But it should not be forgotten that one of the advantages of claiming to continue to do things “as they have always been
done” is to essentialise and reproduce existing differences between patrilineages. We are back at the idea that practising rituals allows the Kwanja to maintain and express their patrilineal identities and to distinguish themselves from their neighbours at a variety of levels. This aspect tends to be more important than the belief in the efficacy of rituals, as can be deduced from the irregularity with which major festivals are held, as well as from the poor exegesis explaining why things are done the way they are. Kwanja informants are generally not keen to find rationalisations about the symbolism used and the significance of what is practised. They generally tend to say that they do not do things because they have a meaning, but rather because “it is the tradition”.

In trying to understand why some Chamba groups were very interested in symbolic exegesis while others were not, Richard Fardon (1990: 219-20) argued that the difference may rest in the history of the different groups. Those who have never been displaced and have remained relatively immune to cultural disruption maintain a strong interest in symbolic exegesis and in the efficacy of rituals, while those who have been the object of slave raids and greater cultural challenges are more interested in how rituals can reinforce their identities. The second case would apply to the Kwanja, as they have been close to demographic and cultural extinction in the past. Their current cultural and identity revival rests partly on the practice of rituals, as well as on other factors, such as the translation of the Bible into a Kwanja dialect and the activities of the Kwanja development association. Even though many people have lost faith in the efficacy of traditional rituals, they still participate actively in them as a way to assert their differences and their worth in the face of their neighbours. While the secrets of male rituals are still strictly kept from being divulged to women in some neighbouring groups, for example, Kwanja women know very well that masks are animated by men, and they openly try to guess who it might be by looking at their feet or working out who is absent from the crowd. The value of many rituals is no longer to be found in their secrecy or efficacy, but rather in their importance for the definition of people’s identity and the pride that they might derive from it.
Conclusions

Accounting for Kwanja rituals poses a dilemma. On the one hand, and at a superficial level of analysis, many Kwanja informants (especially among the elite) claim that there exists a formal homogeneity in rituals, and they present masquerades as epitomizing “the” Kwanja ritual. Masquerades are then performed to celebrate special events in which it is wished to show that the Kwanja as a group stands behind a political person, a political party or a development association. On the other hand, a detailed study of rituals shows that such presumed homogeneity dissolves at the level of the group and of the patrilineage, as each has its own specific rituals, and as many groups and lineages do not have masquerades (or only for enthronement rituals, which are very rare). Yet, again, looking more closely, one can find a number of common points that characterize the structure of all Kwanja rituals, some of which are also found in the rituals of neighbouring populations. One can then conclude that the homogeneity and essence of Kwanja rituals are not found where they are claimed to be, namely in the unique form of masks and masquerades of some patrilineages, but rather in the common structure that organises all rituals and that confers a central importance on kinship, reciprocity, communication with the spiritual world, symbols and identity, regardless of the frequency of rituals, the level of symbolic elaboration, the number of participants and scale of organisation, or the status of the person undergoing a rite of passage.

As in the previous chapter, rituals are something that most Kwanja define as central to their culture and identity. My informants placed a lot of emphasis on this and encouraged me to study them in detail, thus forcing me to spend much more time than ex-

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78 When comparing Kwanja rituals with those of their neighbours’, one finds a number of similarities, for example, in symbols or communications with ancestors (see Baeke 2004; Barley 1983; Fardon 1990; Muller 2002; Pradelles de Latour 1991; Vincent 1991; Zeitlyn 1994). But other factors remain specific to the Kwanja, such as the collaboration between different kinship groups. When comparing the “Mambiloid groups” (Kwanja, Mambila, Wawa) with other ethnic groups in Cameroon, one can see that some regions share similarities with them (chiefly symbols in the Grassfields and in Adamawa, for example), while others have fewer similarities (the coastal and rainforest areas, for example).
pected on this subject in order to grasp its complexities. And, as in the previous chapter, I became torn between two ways of constructing Kwanja rituals. On the one hand, I was faced with a narrative claiming formal homogeneity, presumably in order to reinforce the creation of an “imagined community” (Anderson 1986). This ideal, however, did not survive the analysis of rituals at the level of the groups. On the other hand, I argued that all rituals build on the same structural material. But this argument derives from an in-depth analysis and is not something that is claimed by Kwanja informants. I am thus caught between a local ideal that tends to present things in simplistic and homogenous terms, and a reality which is much more complex and runs up against the idealised narrative of homogeneity.

In this chapter, I have described a common structure capable of engendering widely different types of formal rituals (some with masquerades, other not). Thus, the existence of a same set of structuring rules does not preclude complexity, and it is impossible to predict the form that a ritual structured in conformity with a given set of rules might take. This also teaches us that, instead of comparing rituals on the basis of their formal differences, it is much more fruitful to compare the ways in which they are constructed and structured. We will come back to this important point in the last chapter.
CHAPTER 5
THE ORDER OF THINGS

During my last visit to the Kwanja, in 2005, I was really happy to meet with Jeremy again, who had been my assistant since my very first fieldwork in 1993. Yet, Jeremy did not seem as happy as I was, or as he used to be. He looked sombre and had a gloomy face. As we walked together in the bush, he stopped and told me, gravely: “Quentin, there is something that I need to tell you”. He paused, looking at the ground, and it was clear that he was making an effort to tell me this. “People in the village think that I have bewitched and killed my brother” … “But it is not true”, he shouted, with tears in his eyes. “I have not killed my brother. I have even drunk the poison of the ordeal that kills criminals, but people still don’t believe I’m innocent”.

Accusations of witchcraft and sorcery are rife among the Kwanja, as in other parts of Cameroon (Geschiere 1997). Death, sickness, accidents, failures of all sorts happen regularly and unpredictably. The Kwanja, like me, recognise direct causes of misfortune, such as viruses, bacteria, snake poison, injury, drought, pest, crop failure, floods, and the like. These explain how people come to suffer. But, as Evans-Pritchard (1937) has argued, they also recognise the existence of ultimate causes of misfortune that have a social origin (witchcraft, sorcery, curses) or a natural one (transgression of taboos, abominations). These explain why misfortune strikes a particular person instead of a neighbour, and why it happens at one particular time instead of another.

Misfortune does not strike people equally, and when it occurs, people always try to understand whether it is the result of “bad luck”, “God’s will”, an “uncareful lifestyle” (i.e. of direct causes), or of retribution for past misbehaviour and/or the result of malevolence (i.e. of ultimate causes). The last interpretation is more common, and given the frequency of sickness and death among the Kwanja, not a day passes without people trying to explain misfortune in these terms. In this chapter I will argue that ultimate causes are always constructed as deriving from some form of disequilibrium, whether in the natural order of things or in the social order.
According to this logic, the best way to prevent misfortune is therefore to maintain or restore the cosmological order (keep things where they should be and as they should be) as well as the social order (keep peace and concord).

**Transgressions of the natural order**

Transgressions of the social and natural world order can take different forms (see Douglas 1966). Abominations are, in themselves, a transgression of the right order of things, a mixing of categories. Their simple existence is likely to create misfortune, unless one is diligent in getting rid of them. Taboos, on the other hand, are rules that ensure the right order of things, and their transgression brings both disorder and misfortune. While abominations appear randomly and are nobody’s fault in particular, misfortune linked to the transgression of taboos derives from the victim’s (or his close parents’) behaviour. In both cases, no harmful intention is found. Misfortune results from mistakes, misbehaviour or bad luck, and often involves interaction with the spiritual world.

**Abominations**

Abominations are things or events that are abhorred because they defy the right categorisation of the world – its order. They are usually thought to bring about misfortune, unless swift action is taken. For example, among the Kwanja, eclipses of the moon are believed to bring death or catastrophies, and people remain awake and bang on their pans until it is over. Babies whose first teeth come out of the upper jaw instead of the lower one (as is the norm) are seen as an abomination and announce a death within its family. Such children used to be put to death (see also Gottlieb 2004: 225). Babies that are born without strength, with small eyes (some say “snake eyes”), small teeth, thin and fragile arms and legs, and are incapable of sitting or standing properly, or babies that look very old, although they are young, are said to be inhabited by a bad spirit, or the spirit of a very old person, or else the spirit of an aquatic snake.
Although they are not an abomination as such (they do not bring misfortune), they are out of place in human society. Such children can be left on the bank of a river while the parents hide behind bushes or grasses. If the child is really a snake spirit, it will cry for some time, then stop, look around to make sure that no one is watching, and transform him- or herself in a big snake who will disappear into the river (I met informants claiming to have been the eye-witnesses of such occurrences). When “snake children” die, the family must refrain from crying and mourning, as the spirit who lived in the child would interpret such behaviour as expressing regret and as an invitation to come back.

Refraining from crying is also characteristics of certain diseases that are regarded with awe. When someone dies of leprosy, of the “disease of the belly” (bandá hwàmàñì), or of epilepsy (the “disease of falling” - bandá gvwàñì), one should not cry, lest the disease comes back in the matrilineage of the affected person. Other precautions must also be taken to prevent the transmission of misfortune.

Lepers are said to have “hot blood” and are advised to avoid fatty or hot foods (the fresh meat of antelopes, catfish, python, termites, modern salt, chili, groundnuts, pistaccios, etc.), and to avoid “heating activities”, such as sexual relationships. Likewise, people who have had sexual relationships and have not washed, or menstruating women, should refrain from visiting them or even looking at their remedies, as this could ruin their efficiency. One can sleep with those who are affected, but the disease is said to strike whoever opens the door in the morning, which is why the affected person must be the first to do it.

People who die with a swollen belly (mainly because of pregnancy or witchcraft) must also be treated with extreme caution to prevent misfortune, a belief which is also found among the neighbouring Tikar, Mambila or Wawa. Apart from refraining from crying, a ndjáñì must also operate on the dead body using a special knife kept for that purpose. In the case of a pregnant woman, the child is taken out of the belly and buried with the mother if it is a girl, or in another grave if it is a boy. In the case of someone who has been attacked by a witch, one finds in the belly what the witch placed there (meat, palm wine, water) out of revenge for having
been refused such things by the victim. The person who operates on
the deceased stays in a house far away from the funeral, as he would
become deaf if he heard any people not following the taboo on crying.
Three days after the death (four days for a woman), the matrilineage
of the deceased and the matrilineage of his or her father provide sev-
eral chickens that are cooked in a pot with plenty of bush onions
(làngání), chili, salt, pistaccio and oil, to make a meal that is ex-
tremely hot and rich, i.e. the opposite of what people from leprosy
eat. At the end of the ritual meal, maize beer is poured on the cook-
ing fire, and the organiser takes some cold and moist ashes to apply
the mixture on the navel of every participant. The organiser then takes
special leaves and whips the belly of each participant.

Taboos and spirits

Taboos are rules that predict a negative outcome following a certain
action. The sanction for transgressing a taboo is automatic; it is in-
scribed in the transgression itself (Smith 1979). Taboos prohibit
certain actions because of the danger they bring to the trespasser or
the members of his or her group. They are usually of a symbolic
nature and differ from crimes and social rules that relate to morale
or etiquette and are sanctioned socially. Ritual obligations can often
be seen as the mirror image of taboos. Whereas taboos are defined
negatively as things that should not be done, ritual obligations are
defined positively as things that should be done. The cognitive ra-
tionale is the same, and they both aim at preventing the same kind
of misfortune.

The Kwanja distinguish between two kinds of taboos. The
first type, kpòrì, refers to the respect due to the chief and is likened
to a sacred law or commandment. For example, it is taboo not to

79 The food avoided by leprous people tends to be similar to the saltless and tasteless
food sacrificed to ancestors, as if a spirit inside them had to be accommodated. The
food eaten to keep the disease of the belly at bay is precisely, and exaggeratedly, the
type of food that is avoided by leprous people, as well as by spirits or ancestors, as if
a spirit had to be kept at bay. Moreover, applying ash mixed with maize beer to the
navel is also a key way of ending a ritual and cutting communication with spirits and
ancestors, as described in the previous chapter.
bring the right back leg of cloven-hoofed game caught in a trap to the chief, or a leopard, python and red-feathered bird. It is also strictly forbidden to commit adultery with the chief’s wife. Anyone who is caught has his earlobe cut, or else a dog is slaughtered above his head before he is banned from the village. It is also a kpærì to steal the game caught in someone else’s trap, or to touch the bones of a dead. Only chiefs can ritually lift the curse brought about by the transgression of a kpærì.

The second type of taboo, jirì, refers to prohibitions followed by everyone and linked to imprudent behaviour. Transgressing a jirì brings misfortune on the transgressor only (as when a leper eats fat or “hot” foods that are jirì to him) while transgressing a kpærì brings down a curse not only on the transgressor, but also on all his or her matrilineage. In theory, all those belonging to a same patrilineage follow the same food taboos (jirì). Some of these food taboos derive from a curse (kàrì) given by an ancestor to his descendants. For example, when Chief Nyagba was served couscous on a banana leave with a sauce made with ashes by his children, he was so disappointed that he cursed his descendants, forcing them to eat this type of food every time they had a new child. Other patrilineage food taboos prohibit consumption of an animal that had helped a member of the patrilineage in the past – often a monkey or a snake that had suckled a lost child, or a bird or monkey that warned ancestors of approaching enemies. Some of these “historical taboos” concern only chiefs and dignitaries. For example, all Kwanja chiefs, their wives, and their most important dignitaries refrain from eating catfish, as the latter had helped their ancestors to escape from a raid by making a bridge, thus allowing the ancestors to cross a river, and then separating so as to remove the bridge when the ancestors’ enemies tried to cross the river. Nyasunda chiefs must also avoid eating a certain kind of antelope because it was found chasing flies away from the rotting body of a dead chief which had been abandoned during a raid, or else because it was found giving birth on the tomb of a chief.

Finally, there are things that are not tabooed as such but are nonetheless considered “bad” (bità). For example, although drinking from the chief’s calabash or being behind him when he is sitting are not tabooed (jirì), they are bad (bità) and avoided because they are
thought to bring bad luck. Pregnant women also tend to avoid eating the flesh of animals associated with characteristics that they want to avoid among their children. For example, some women avoid squirrel since this animal is a thief. Women and children should avoid eating the flesh of leopard, as they are supposed to be too weak to ingest it. It is not forbidden (jîrì) as such to commit incest or to mock an elder in-law; no misfortune derives from doing it, only shame (fèrì). But it is forbidden (jîrì) to marry within one’s matrilineage.

*Human spirits* play an important role in describing the world order and explaining taboos. Humans are not just constituted of bones, which come from the father’s side, and blood or flesh, which come from the mother’s side. They also have a spirit (*nyîbi*), which comes from the spiritual aquatic world. A spirit provides a person with consciousness, reason or sense, and intelligence (Gausset 2001a). When someone is unconscious (asleep or in a coma), the spirit is said to leave the body. Dreams are the memories of wanderings in the spiritual world; nightmares are warnings about attacks by the spirits of witches, or warnings from the spirits of ancestors. Unreasonable, shameless, stupid or mad people who are unable to distinguish good from bad are also said to have lost their spirit. When one is woken up suddenly, it takes time to get all one’s wits about one, as it takes time for the wandering spirit to come back to the body. Likewise, the spirit of those who are about to die and are delirious is said to have left their body already and to be wandering around.

It takes time for children to acquire a strong spirit, i.e. consciousness, and the notions of shame, intelligence, and reason. Babies are often asleep (unconscious), during which time their spirit is thought to wander around. When they say incoherent things or point to places where there is nothing, they are thought to be talking to spirits. Children go around naked and have no notion of shame. Young children are often unconscious, ignorant, foolish and shameless, and their spirit is therefore volatile, not yet fixed in their body. Young children have an ambiguous spiritual nature and close relations with the spiritual world. Precautions should be taken to avoid losing their spirit.
Since the spirit of children is said to be “coming from water”, parents expecting a baby should not kill snakes, frogs, snails or fish, because in doing so they might kill the aquatic spirit of the child that is seeking to come into the womb of the pregnant woman. After bathing a baby, one should take the water carefully out of the basin instead of throwing it out violently, as this would risk throwing away the spirit of the child, who might be in the water playing with other aquatic spirits. Children’s spirits are said to long for the time when they were living in the aquatic and spiritual world, and they go back into the water whenever they have the chance. Some even prefer their original spiritual world and let themselves die in order to go back to where they came from. When a newborn baby dies after a few days, it is said that “the baby has come and has gone back”, meaning that it did not like its new life and preferred to go back to the spiritual world where it came from. Care should therefore be taken to make children feel comfortable in the human world so as to make sure that their spirit stays in their body and does not long too much for its lost spiritual world (see also Gottlieb 2004).

Children’s spirits do not just stay in water; they also stay in the wind. The Kwanja word for wind (foó) can in some contexts be synonymous with spirit (nyibí). A strong wind, such as the Harmattan, is called a “bad wind” (foó bítá), which also means “bad spirit”. When such a wind uproots roofs or destroys maize, it is said to be the work of angry or hungry spirits. As children’s spirits can travel in the wind, one hides babies inside houses or wrapped in clothing from head to toe to prevent them from going away with other spirits in the wind. Babies who cry when a strong wind passes by are said to have “open eyes” and to be able to see spirits passing by. Such children are also said to be “children from above” (mon tír), as they fly in the wind and are able to see things from above. Likewise, children who cry continuously despite feeding or who are sick and whose suffering resists all treatment are often said to have “open eyes” and to cry because they can see the spirits flying or swimming around them and long to join them. Traditional healers

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80 “Water” (nyìmù) refers both to the water found in rain, wells, pools and rivers and to semen.
81 This taboo is widespread all over sub-Saharan Africa.
can then use some remedy to “close the eyes” of these children, although some parents prefer to avoid any treatment and simply bear the crying of their child, since “open-eyed” children are thought to grow up smarter and more intelligent than average.

Twins are even more closely associated with the spiritual world, as their spirits are very strong and capricious. A twin who feels neglected by a parent might prevent the success of the latter’s enterprise, while a twin who is jealous of a sibling might kill him or her, and great care must be taken always to give the same gifts to both of them. When twins are weaned, a “twin ceremony” is organized that is like an enthronement ceremony (see the previous chapter) and that confers some of the chiefs’ prerogatives on the parents.

When someone dies, the spirit (sg. nyiri; pl. nyibi) is said to leave the body to travel and rest in the trench of origin. Here, the spirit is sometimes associated with the shadow (nyirkini). People claim that a corpse has no shadow and is therefore heavier. Before finding eternal peace in the trench of origin, the spirit of a dead person wanders around the widow(er) during the mourning period, being somewhere in between this world and the hereafter. It haunts the widow(ers) and compels them to follow taboos (jiri) during the mourning period. Widows and widowers should wear a white cloth and should normally not change or wash it (although this is allowed today). They are forbidden (jiri) to cut or braid their hair, drink in public, go to the market, dance, run, or travel in a car that would go fast. Widows should refrain from having sexual relations. Widowers who are polygamists can resume sexual relations with their other wives, but they cannot search for a new wife. Those who transgress these taboos run the risk of becoming insane. But while widows and widowers are driven mad if they forget their dead spouse too soon, they can also become mad if they do not forget them at all. When a widow(er) is driven by sadness, weeps all the time and cannot stop thinking about his or her dead spouse, it is also

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82 The Kwanja distinguish between the shadow (nyirkini) of people and animals from the shade (cucwami) of trees, houses or objects.
83 The spirit of a witch or sorcerer does not find its way to the trench and is doomed to wander around endlessly without finding peace. It then remains a ghost (swab) forever and can hex those who cross its path (especially at night). One uses smelly bush onion (njedi) to chase these ghosts away.
Transgressions of the natural order

a sign of being haunted by his or her spouse’s spirit. Widow(er)s then sleep with medicines under their pillow in order to avoid dreaming too much about their lost one.

The mourning period arranges the remembering and forgetting of the deceased, so that it is neither too weak nor too strong and neither too short nor too long. After the death of an adult, three ceremonies are organised: the burial and seclusion of widow(er)s, the inheritance, and the end of the mourning (see the previous chapter). During each ceremony, the spirit of the dead comes back to the village, only to be driven further on its way to the spiritual hereafter, until it finds eternal peace after the last ceremony. Thus, taboos keep spirits away and force widows to remember them, while rituals force widows to forget about them through lifting taboos. Mourners are forced to remember in order to be able to forget. If they forget too soon and transgress the taboos, they will remember forever and become insane as they will be haunted by the spirit of the deceased. After the mourning period has ended, the dead are still remembered during ancestors’ cults or other rituals described in the previous chapter. The logic is then based on reciprocity: ancestors are remembered so that they do not forget the living and give them fertility, success and good fortune.

Bush spirits are said to live in a world that mirrors that of humans. While humans live on earth, in villages and in the fields during the day, bush spirits live in a world that is in the bush, underground and under water, especially during the night. While humans mostly eat crops that grow above ground, spirits are said to nourish themselves from roots, that is, from underground products. While humans keep domesticated animals, flocks of wild animals are said to be the herds of genies, which is why one needs medicines when going hunting. Spirits are said to live in water pools, caves, burrows, ravines, big trees, on the tops of mountains, at springs, doorsteps or crossroads, i.e. all places marking a transition between two categories (earth-water, ground-underground, earth-sky, one way and another, inside-outside, etc.). The likelihood of crossing the path of a bush spirit is greater at dawn, dusk, midday, new moon, full moon, and on the days during which big rituals are organised, i.e. all times marking a transition between two periods (night and day, morning and afternoon, one
month/state and another). Bush spirits are dangerous to everyone, but especially to some categories of vulnerable people such as menstruating and pregnant women (and ultimately their husbands), those who have recently had sexual relations, especially an adulterous one, newborn babies and widow(er)s, i.e. people in a transitory state, mixing two categories (man-woman, nature-culture, one social state and another). Bush spirits are also especially dangerous to people engaged in a delicate activity, such as blacksmithing, hunting, making pots, or brewing (Gausset 2002a).

When people cross the path of bush spirit (if they “step on them” or if a spirit steps on their shadow, which is especially wide at dawn or dusk but very narrow at noon), they are said to catch a “bad wind” or “bad spirit” (foó bítá) that can bring mental disturbance, sickness or bad luck. To prevent this from happening, one should avoid going out at times and in places that cut across categories, especially when one is in a liminal state or practising an activity that cuts across categories. To be pregnant, draw water or bathe in the river are not problems in themselves, but it is very dangerous, and therefore taboo (jirì), to draw water or bathe in the river at noon and dusk when pregnant. It is necessary to go hunting and sleep with one’s wife to reproduce the household, but it is bad (má bítá) to go hunting without washing off “the smell of sex” in the morning. Likewise, going hunting when one’s wife is menstruating can bring bad luck.84 A menstruating wife should not come near raffia palm trees, which are tapped for wine, lest it stops producing. Behind local explanations for taboos in terms of bush spirits, one sees a cosmological system that categorizes the world, regulating the existence of transitory states and preventing their mixing. Abominations and things that cross boundaries might produce disorder in themselves (Douglas 1966), but the risk of misfortune brought about by the mixing of things in a transitory state is even greater (Gausset 2002a; Gausset and Mogensen 1996).

84 Anthropologists often associate menstrual blood with miscarriage and death. However, it is often understood locally as the building material of a baby. When a woman is pregnant she stops menstruating, and the menstrual blood is then believed to accumulate in her belly to form the foetus. Having menses is a sign of fertility, as those who are too young or too old to menstruate cannot have children (and are often specifically freed from taboos). Such ideas are very widespread in sub-Saharan Africa; see Gausset (2002a).
Prevention

Preventing misfortune deriving from transgressions requires avoiding any behaviour that could upset the cosmological order, as well as action to address misfortune and restore the upset balance in case misfortune happens. Prevention relies mainly on education and advice about taboos and careful behaviour. The transgression of taboos (especially the most serious ones, such as the kpōri) often requires purification that is usually made by ingesting wood powder from the ndúnygíni stick (see fig. 30). But it also requires that rituals are organized regularly to maintain or restore the balance between the world of the living and the spiritual world, as discussed in Chapter 5.

Fig. 30: Regalia of a chief: a leopard-teeth necklace, a buffalo tail with cowries, a single bell, bracelets, the chief’s calabash, ndúnygíni stick and knife, and the ṣvwént magic allowing the chief to transform himself into a hippopotamus.
Transgressions of the social order

So far, we have mainly analysed misfortune deriving from an unbalance with the cosmological (physical and spiritual) world or with power hierarchies and inscribed in abominations or taboos. I shall now focus on misfortune deriving from conflicts and malevolence, which can be described as transgressions of the social order. While transgressions of the cosmological order are inscribed in uncareful behaviour, transgressions of the social order are rather linked to anger, greed and jealousy.

Blessings, curses and bad words

On one of my visit to Cameroon, I was angry to hear that the car battery that I had left behind after my previous fieldwork and which I intended to use for my portable computer had been taken away by the owner of a tractor who lived in town and came once a year to plough the fields of those who could afford his services. I wrote several letters to the tractor driver, but never received any answer. When he came to the village again, I asked him to compensate me for the lost battery. Given his bad faith and refusal to do so, I lost my temper and started shouting. Suddenly, the atmosphere changed. Those who were listening to the argument intervened and asked me to calm down. The tractor owner became very uneasy and said that he would really try to see what he could do, but that I should not be angry with him. He did bring the money two days later and, after he had paid me back, he (and my friends) insisted again that I should not bear any grudge, and I had to reassure them several times that I did not.

Keeping on good terms with everybody is a central value of Kwanja life. Generally speaking, this is said to bring a lot of good blessings (kārī ſjaŋtā) from those with whom one is on good terms. Such blessings and good wishes (especially from the elderly), taken together, tend to bring good luck and God’s protection to the person who is kind to everyone and has no quarrels with anyone.85 People who have reached this state of grace are then immune to witchcraft or sorcery attacks.

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85 In the Bible translation, the term mgbānyirì (the chief of the spirit) is preferred to mgbānyíbì (the chief of spirits).
Individuals who have a quarrel with someone but who wish to preserve their accumulated capital of good blessings generally let go, saying “God is there” (mgbányirí m̀á ku), or “there are spirits” (nyíbì m̀á ku), leaving it up to God or the spirits to judge the person, rather than fighting for their rights. Others prefer to fight, and this can easily lead to verbal threats. In the heat of a quarrel, someone might utter a “bad word” (njàb bità) or “bad words” (nyìngí bità) such as “You will see what happens to you”, or “I know what I will do to you”. As soon as these threats are uttered, the quarrel takes on a different dimension, since wishing harm is somehow akin to threatening to practice witchcraft or sorcery, and any misfortune that might happen in the days that follow is seen as the result of such action. These utterances are also feared because a third person might take advantage of the situation and harm one of the conflicting parties anonymously, thus benefitting from the fact that all the suspicion would automatically fall on the other party to the quarrel (see also Baeke 1995: 24). Thus, as soon as a verbal threat is made, the potential victim is likely to seek mediation from others to make sure that the words are taken back and that the “cursing” person does not bear a grudge.

Resentment or rancour (njùg) can, in itself, bring misfortune, without a word being spoken. Rancour derives mainly from situations in which someone’s authority is not respected. If a husband or wife, a family or a village does not do what the spouse, family head or chief asks, the person whose authority is at stake accumulates rancour. The body heats up, and this can lead to disease or a curse. A husband who sleeps with his wife while she is filled with resentment against him might kill her. A village whose chief is angry might face a drought. To end this, people must follow orders and lift the curse by mixing flour with herbs in a calabash to “pour the rancour” (sùu njùg) on to the ground.

Curses (kàrí bità) are the most serious forms of verbal threats. Ancestors can send either blessings (kàrí njàntá) or curses to their descendants according to their behaviour. The anger or satisfaction of ancestors can be read in omens and divination. Ancestors can also be called on to send a curse to a relative. Kwanja history has several cases of notables who felt insulted by their children and cursed them, forbidding them to inherit the political title. Some
of the patrilineages’ taboos also derive from the past curse of a chief who became angry and called on his ancestors to impose restrictions on his descendants. Even today, men can curse their patrilineal offspring if they feel that they are not showing enough respect for them. I witnessed fathers several times talking harshly to their adult children, requiring more respect from them, and their children bowing their heads and keeping quiet. I also heard several men declare openly that they wanted their property to be inherited by their uterine nephews so that none of their children should get anything. Women can curse a child too by declaring that it is no longer hers. For example, if a child goes against the mother’s decision regarding marriage and elopes with a lover, the mother might threaten to stop seeing him or her as her child, which is already, in itself, a curse (kári bítá). This would usually prompt the eloper to come back and ask for forgiveness, since losing membership in one’s matrilineage is one of the most terrible punishments that people can think of. The curse can also be collective and be accompanied by social punishment when someone hits his parents – one of the most serious crimes (ndàŋ) among the Kwanja. If such a crime is committed, villagers gather in the morning and beat out a tásàŋnàbì rhythm around the house of the criminal, as if he or she had passed away. The culprit is then brought to the palace and given a sermon by the chief and the population. One “beats the fault” (yàrà ndàŋ), beating the sacred single bell on the culprit’s head to curse him or her as well as any descendants. The culprit must pay a fine to his or her parent before being banned from the village, and every adult in the village (especially those who are first born) feels compelled to pay a fine of one chicken to his or her own parent, to ask for forgiveness. The whole village is fined for the behaviour of one of its members.

A curse (kári bítá) derives its potency from a reference to ancestors. The potency of bad words (njàb bítá) tends to be grounded in the threat to use witchcraft and sorcery. Rancour becomes neither a curse nor bad words as long as nothing is said. The misfortune that derives from it is the opposite of the good fortune that derives from blessings. When someone is liked, that person is automatically blessed and will succeed in his or her entreprises. When someone is disliked, that person will have problems. The best way to prevent misfortune is to keep on good terms with everybody
in general, and with one’s parents and chief in particular. As soon as a conflict comes out into the open, people should take action to dampen it or “cool the heart” of the conflicting parties through counselling, appeasing statements and “pouring the rancour”.

Just as verbal threats carry potency in themselves, it is often enough to stop a conflict by apologizing or making an appeasing statement such as: “It is true that we had a quarrel, but I have never done anything to harm you and I have never wished you any misfortune. Even if I was angry against you, it is finished today and I hold you no grudge anymore”. Making such statements is important to be free of rancour and start anew. But it is also important to avoid being accused of practising witchcraft or sorcery, a dreadful accusation that everybody tries to avoid. Conflicting parties might wish to seal their settlement before the chief. They are then made to swear to stop nurturing bad feelings and lick the chief’s throne (ŋgòdì), or his big toe. Anyone going back on such an oath would then automatically be cursed and die. Likewise, a culprit who has been clearly identified can be directly cursed by the chief and die if he or she continues to harbour, and practise, evil deeds.

*Witchcraft and sorcery*

One evening a friend visited me after dinner. At some point he asked: “Is it true what people say about you?” There was a rumour going around saying that I had been seen naked at dawn in the streets of Bankim town. My spirit was wandering around, unable to find its way back to my body. I had been interviewing old men about magic and witchcraft, and the rumour said that one of them had tricked me, telling me only half the truth about how to practise sorcery, enough to allow my spirit to leave my body, but not enough for my spirit to find its way back. Although the accusation was quite benign (I was not accused of having harmed anyone), it was very difficult for me to work normally during the next two weeks. Everywhere I went, whether in Yimbéré or in neighbouring villages, people felt uneasy in my presence. Those who used to joke with me now greeted me with suspicion. My closest friends, who were publicly refuting accusations of sorcery and defending my reputation, were all having a hard time, as they opened themselves up to the suspicion of their own complicity with me. After two weeks, however, people had forgotten about the case; another rumour had taken over and someone else was suffering from collective ostracism.
Knowing about witchcraft and sorcery automatically brings suspicions of practising it. When I tried to address this topic in my interviews, informants inevitably declared that they knew absolutely nothing about it – i.e. they did not practise it themselves. Asking about it openly was seen either as a hidden accusation that my informants were criminals, or as a sign that I wished to harm someone and wanted to learn how to do it. It was mostly in informal conversation (both private and collective) or in specific cases of accusations in the village that the subject was openly discussed and that the variety of presumed occult practices was revealed.

Poison (mbùtù) is said to be a common way of killing people and is widely feared throughout Cameroon. It can be added to food, and I have, for example, been advised not to eat food prepared by particular families who were suspected of concealing harmful feelings. But the fear of poisoning is especially prominent when serving drinks. Customers in bars generally refuse to drink from a bottle that has not been opened in front of them, or if the thumb nail of the waiter has touched the drink, as it is feared that there could be poison under the nail. In all the ceremonies in which I took part, those who served the beer were carefully chosen and were held accountable in case of any accusation of poisoning.

The whiskers of leopards (sárárí mbwárá) are said to be one of the most powerful poisons, and they are therefore the object of special care. When a leopard is killed, the hunter is not allowed to go close to the animal’s body. He must immediately go back to the village and call the chief and his dignitaries to inform them of the event. The dignitaries and the hunter then go to the place where the leopard was killed. They look closely at the grass or traces on the soil to verify that the hunter has not been close to the leopard, i.e. that the hunter did not make use of the opportunity to take any whiskers away. They then carefully count the number of whiskers to make sure that they are all present (there should be 7, 10, 14, or 30, according to different informants). Finally, the elders cut the
whiskers, and then go together in the bush to burn them and bury the ashes deep in the ground.  

Hereditary witchcraft (mbérà) is a spiritual power used by some women at night. It is while a witch is asleep that her spirit leaves the body to wander around and attack someone, in order to suck the blood or eat the vital elements (heart, liver) of her victim. She starts to slowly eat bits of the heart, in order to see whether the chief reacts and forces her to stop her wrongdoings. If the chief stays quiet, she continues to empty the victim from within, until the latter dies. Witches are said to eat in congregations, following a rotation that people compare to a tontine (an economic type of “merry-go-round”). Each witch must, when her turn comes, bring a victim who is eaten by the entire group of witches. She can either give a member of her matrilineage (usually a child) or else find a victim outside her own group. If she cannot find any victim when her turn comes, her colleagues will eat her. As a result, witchcraft is not so much presented as deriving from the will to harm people, but rather from an uncontrollable craving for blood that is as difficult to resist as hunger itself.

The power of witchcraft arises from a special organ located in the intestine. This organ is inherited from the mother and shared by all the members of the same matrilineage (although the power is only active if the mother practised witchcraft while she was pregnant). The local Kwanja term for matrilineage is either “one/same intestine-uterus” (lání máán), or “one/same witch” (mbérà máán) (see Chapter 2). Witches are said to operate mainly in their own village and to be jealous of their territory. They forbid witches from neighbouring villages to operate in their own. As a result, anyone wishing to escape from witchcraft attacks just needs to move to another village to be safe.

Sorcery relies on acquired knowledge or “recipes” used to harm others. The Kwanja distinguish different types. Tôbi used to be the

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86 Leopards were eradicated from the region by the colonial administration in the 1950s through use of poisoned bait as a measure to support the development of cattle herding. However, a few leopards survive in the mountains, and one of them was killed by a Kwanja from Yimbéré in 1999.
most common form of sorcery. It is supposed to be mainly used by men and acquired from patrilateral relatives or traditional healers. There are different forms of *tábi*. One of them operates during the day. A sorcerer spies on his victim’s movements and hides in a bush, naked, with a rope around his hips, to ambush him or her. He puts a bush pepper grain in his mouth and must crunch it when the first person passes by (hopefully his victim, or else he strikes an innocent person). If nobody passes by, the sorcerer will die, unless he defecates and eats his own excrement. Another form of *tábi* operates at night. The sorcerer imitates the voice of a parent of his victim and calls him or her. When the victim answers, the sorcerer cracks the pepper and hexes his victim. A third form of *tábi* operates against thieves. As soon as someone steals something that has been magically protected, he or she is struck with the hex and might die. *Tábi* also refers to burying objects on paths, at crossroads, doorsteps, or at the entrance of a village, thus harming those who step over them or preventing any success in the village. This form of sorcery is said to be on the decline because of the many rules that a sorcerer must follow in order to ensure the efficacy of the magic. Many things can go wrong and turn against the sorcerer himself.

Another form of sorcery, which is said to have become dominant today, is the blowing of invisible poisoned needles (*tári*). The needles strike victims with sudden pains in the chest and prevent them from doing hard work in the fields, or kill them if swift action is not taken by the chief or a traditional healer. *Tári* is said to be nastier than *tábi* because it is used even in benign conflicts or jealousy. Apart from the needles, other forms of *tári* can be buried and catch the victim when stepping over them. Yet another can stick to someone and travel great distances to find a victim. For example, a sorcerer might shake hands with someone who is travelling and ask him to greet someone else on his way. The *tári* sticks to the hand of the traveller and hexes the intended victim as soon as the traveller shakes his or her hand. Some forms of *tári* lead the corpse of the victim to become rotten internally. Another form makes the victim urinate and defecate on him or herself.

Another widespread type of sorcery is called *mgbàtìbi*. This is practised mainly by young people or even children, usually under the direction of elders, who derive their power from sticks buried in
the banks of a river. New members are recruited through trickery. They are asked to climb a tree or are magically placed at the top of a tree and cannot come down unless they agree to become a member of the congregation. *Mgbâtibî* is usually used to bring either good or bad fortune to someone else. People using *mgbâtibî* seldom enrich themselves, but they can steal the success or intelligence of someone else and transfer it on to a friend. They can also prevent any type of success by competitors, whether in the fields, at school or in business. If a user of *mgbâtibî* feels insulted by someone, a common revenge is to make that person suffer from jiggers. People who have *mgbâtibî* can also straddle one of their relatives spirits and use it as a horse or a plane to travel great distances throughout the night. In the morning, the victim wakes up exhausted and with terrible back pain. *Mgbâtibî* does not kill but can send a minor disease forcing people to spend money on treatments, and thus preventing them from accumulating wealth. This type of magic used to be widespread in the 1970s and 1980s, and was found in different regions of Cameroon (Fisyi and Geschie 1990: 140-2; Timmermans 1969: 75). In the 1990s, itinerant traditional healers toured the villages, administering an ordeal by dropping a small seed in the eye of suspected children. If the seed came out of the eye by itself, the child was innocent. If the seed stayed in the eye, it had caught a user of *mgbâtibî*, and would not come out of the eye until the child had confessed.

*Ndëwènî* is a magical power owned by men, mainly chiefs or dignitaries, but also ordinary people. The price for acquiring such magic is said to be a human person, usually a member of the matrilineage. The magical means allows its owner’s spirit to travel in the wind or water currents, or to be transformed into an animal (leopard, lion, hippopotamus or crocodile) and to engage in a war with *ndëwènî* people from neighbouring villages. The object of the war is to defend one’s village against the attacks of others, or to steal their game, fish and agricultural fertility, and bring them back to the village. This magic is therefore positively valued, and people do not hide the fact that they possess it (see fig. 30, the *ndëwènî* of a chief). However, it is also said that this magic can sometimes be used to retaliate against people who show disrespect to its owner, preventing those who misbehave from having success in their enterprises.
Finally, œuvè—æ is a power that allows its owner to send multitudes of animals to destroy something or someone. A sorcerer can use it to send hedgehogs, birds or monkeys to ruin the fields of a competitor. A war chief can also use it to send ants or even soldiers against his enemies.

Prevention

Modern medicines are perceived to be inefficient in the fight against witchcraft and sorcery (or even curses and breach of taboos) because they only treat the symptoms, not the ultimate causes of diseases. As a consequence, people rely on a variety of strategies to prevent misfortune. One of them is to keep on good terms with everyone, to accumulate blessings, and to follow an exemplary life that conforms to Biblical or Koranic teaching. As this might not be enough to prevent people from being jealous, even people who are generally friendly to everyone can be compelled to rely on using charms to protect themselves and their family: most babies wear belts to protect them against the attacks of witches, for example.

But this might still not be enough, and misfortunes can even strike people who take precautionary measures. Action must be taken when witchcraft or sorcery are suspected. One way to address such problems is to rely on the poison ordeal (bɔ). The poison comes from the bark of the cadi tree (ngindi mbɔ), which is collected and macerated in water. The suspect swears to be innocent and declares that he or she must die if he or she is lying but live if he or she is saying the truth. The suspect then drinks the juice of the bark, which is given by a member of the same matrilineage. If the accused person has told the truth, he or she vomits immediately. If the person has lied, the poison catches him or her and he or she dies within a few hours or days, unless he or she admits the crime and asks for forgiveness. The bɔ must then be undone with the opposite phrasing (“if the suspect is guilty, he or she must live; if the suspect is innocent, he or she must die”) and the accused person starts vomiting the poison. Although this ordeal was prohibited by the colonial administration, it continues to be practised on chickens, and occasionally on humans who decide to drink it at their own initiative to
prove their innocence. But organising this ordeal is not always sufficient to clean the name of someone, as many people believe that modern witches and sorcerers have developed tricks to survive the ordeal, even when they are guilty.

Another way to prevent witchcraft and sorcery is to take an oath, or “cut the sòò” (cìghàdà sòò). A traditional healer (usually of Mambila origin) is called to slaughter a chicken over someone’s head or on the doorstep of a house. An oath (kàrì) is then uttered, saying that “If anyone wishes to harm me or my family, the sòò must catch that person. If I want to harm anyone, the sòò must catch me”. The magic automatically sends any spell back to its sender, but it has a double edge and can also kill the person who cut the sòò if the latter wants to harm someone. It must therefore be used with great care. Such protective means are said to come from the Mambila’s sua (Zeitlyn 1994).

Accusing someone can be an efficient way to prevent witchcraft and sorcery if the accused person denies the accusation, keeps a low profile and tries to solve the conflict. Accusation must be based on suspicion or evidence. When the victim is a small child, the father often suspects a member of the child’s matrilineage, while the mother might be more likely to suspect a co-wife if she has one. When the victim is an adult, the other members of the matrilineage tend to suspect people with whom the victim has quarrelled, which is often a member of his own patrilineage. Evidence can also be given in dreams, as in the following case:

Some years ago, I dreamt that an old woman came down from the roof and tried to feed me with poison (mbùtù). But when her hand approached my mouth, she trembled and could not reach me. I had the same dream the following night, and again on the third night, but then I recognised her - she was my neighbour. I went to the chief, who told me to come back if it happened again. Nothing happened for a week, but then I dreamt it again. She was trying to reach my penis, but her hand was trembling and she could not do it, probably because I had good kàrì and had no conflict with her. I was struggling with her in my dreams and I woke up exhausted. I went to the chief, who called the old woman and asked her why she was trying to harm me. She admitted that she was a mbèrà, and that she could not help it when it took her. The chief ordered her to stop her wrongdoings and asked me to throw one grain of maize at her, so that she would be caught by her own spell if she tried again. The
old woman cried and said that she would abandon whatever wrong she had done.

When people are unsure about the source of their misfortune, they may ask the help of a traditional healer practising divination. Few Kwanja are diviners (mainly old men on the plateau), and people usually consult Mambila diviners, since they are regionally famous for their knowledge and powers. Relying on the service of someone who does not know anything about the conflict or the village of the victim also has the advantage of conferring some form of “objectivity” on the evaluation of the situation. These healers use a variety of devices to identify the cause of the affliction, and then provide specific medicines to treat or prevent it.

Instead of accusing someone directly (with or without the help of a diviner), one might choose instead to refer the case to a dignitary, who will then inform the chief. The chief is supposed to know everything about witches and sorcerers in his village because of his “pierced eyes” and because anyone buying a remedy for protection is supposed to inform the chief of all the details. Chiefs also keep each other informed if they know that one of their villagers has sold a magical device to someone living in a neighbouring village. When the chief’s help is sought, he first confers with his dignitaries in order to establish the cause of the problem. He then organises a public meeting and threatens to denounce the sorcerer or the witch publicly if the latter does not stop his or her practices immediately. The chief might also beat his single ritual bell and curse the witch or sorcerer, saying that misfortune should come back and strike its sender instead of the victim.

**Good and bad powers**

Most people, at some time or another in their lives, use magical means to protect themselves from witchcraft and sorcery. These means can be, among other things, belts or necklaces attached to babies and small children, and medicines that strike thieves, protect

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87 The Mambila are well known for practising spider divination (Zeitlyn 1993b), but many diviners also rely on a variety of other means.
a household or a person against sorcery and witchcraft, provide success in business or farming, good luck when travelling, etc. Although these medicines are used for protection, the line separating them from harmful practices is very thin. First, the protection often sends a misfortune back where it comes from, and is therefore harmful to thieves, witches or sorcerers. Secondly, furthering one’s own interests is often seen as detrimental to others. A love potion secures someone’s attention against his or her will. Boosting one’s harvest or success at school through magical means is often seen as the result of “stealing” other farmers or students’ success and capacity, as if the whole enterprise was a zero-sum game. Thirdly, the same magic can sometimes be used for either good or bad purposes. Chiefs fight against witches with their own weapons and can use them against anybody showing them disrespect. Òuvënì is usually used to further the interests of a village, but can also be used to kill. It is therefore difficult to know the difference between white and black magic. If someone is accused of having harmed someone else, the protective potions that he keeps at home can easily be taken as evidence against him, as can be seen in the case described below.

In a widely publicised case that happened in 2001, the matrilineage of a sick old man consulted a Mambila diviner to discover what he was suffering from. The diviner identified sorcery as the cause, and accused a notable of being the culprit. The notable was summoned and tortured until he admitted his crime. The diviner asked him to show his magic. As the sorcerer had preventively thrown everything he had in the pit latrine to escape any accusation, he was forced to reach into the latrine to take everything out and show it to the crowd. Despite all efforts, the sick victim died the next week. Later, the same sorcerer was again accused to have killed someone else. A council of Kwanja chiefs, deliberating behind closed doors, convicted him and asked the justice department to send a warrant for arrest, so that he could be brought to court and prosecuted. However, the sorcerer was informed of this by one of his matrilineal relatives and fled before the police arrived to arrest him. Later, his matrilineal relatives lobbied the justice department to bury the case.

Another case started shortly afterwards. D had a bar, and the business was very good. At some point, his business declined so much that he had to close the bar. He consulted the same Mambila diviner, who identified as the culprit the son of the first sorcerer (see above). The young man was beaten, tortured and threatened by the angry crowd until he admitted his crimes. He confessed to have dug up medicine to prevent the success of D’s bar, to use his father as a plane to travel to France at night, and to
have taken the brain of another person to give it to his brother and make
him cleverer. He also denounced one of the notables of the village as his
boss. This notable was then also threatened until he admitted his crimes.
Both were forced to show to everyone the medicines they had used. The
notable showed some magic that he had buried at home, while the young
man dug up the mgbàtìbi he had buried close to D’s bar, as well as to
the entrance of the village. They were both banned from the village, but
the notable stayed at home and kept a low profile. The young man came
back after a few years after promising the chief that he would never hurt
anyone again.

The unusual brutality with which these cases were treated shocked many
people. The son of the first convicted sorcerer (the person who was su-
posedly “made cleverer” by his brother), a highly educated and impor-
tant civil servant and a close friend of mine, asked his father to explain
himself. The father replied that he had never practised sorcery and that
he had used the medicine thrown in his pit latrine only as protection
against witchcraft and sorcery, but that he was forced to admit some-
thing he had not done in order to save his life and escape the angry
crowd. However, he dissuaded his son from prosecuting his tormentors -
possibly a wise choice, given that witchcraft and sorcery are recognised
as crimes under Cameroonian law, and that diviners can be called to tes-
tify in court (Rowlands and Warnier 1988; Fisiy and Geschiere 1990).

People accused of witchcraft or sorcery usually see them-
selves (and are seen by their relatives) as the innocent victims of
false accusations, even though they might admit a crime under tor-
ture or threat, or to avoid drinking the poison ordeal. In this context,
the white magic that many people use to protect themselves, their
family or the village can easily be perceived as black magic used to
harm others.

The strength of explanatory schemes

Even when people are forced to admit to a crime which they did not
commit and thus become a victim of the system of belief, this sel-
dom leads them to question the explanatory scheme on which it re-
lies. They still continue to believe that witchcraft and sorcery exist,
and their own experiences do not prevent them from taking part in
accusing others (who might also feel themselves to be the victims
of false accusations) whenever they feel threatened by occult pow-
er. Most adult Kwanja villagers have, at least once in their lives,
suspected someone of practising witchcraft or sorcery, and have also been suspected of the same crime in their turn and denied it. Because of the deep conviction that mystical powers are widespread, it can be an impossible task to fight against accusations, as exemplified in the following case:

A French woman was working on an agro-pastoral project in the region. At some point, a rumour spread that she was riding her motorbike to behead the people she met on her way with a machete. From that day on, on seeing her approaching, children ran out of her way as if they were running for their lives, screaming and terrorised. Bringing to court some of those who claimed to have witnessed her killing someone, proving that their accusation was false and getting them convicted for slander and having lied in court did little to quench the rumour. I had a hard time defending her reputation among my Kwanja friends, and I was always looked upon with awe whenever I visited her.

Rumours spread very quickly and, like bush fires, are impossible to extinguish until they eventually die out by themselves. I experienced this myself when some people (whom I was never able to identify) spread the rumour that I had tried to practice sorcery. It can be argued that such accusations aim neither at finding the truth nor at “punishing” wrongdoers. Rather, they aim at reinstating the social order by correcting people’s behaviour and forcing them to declare publicly that they wish no harm to anyone. One wins acquittal not by denying sorcery but by admitting the crime (see Lévi-Strauss 1974: 190). By pressing for confessions and appeasing statements, witchcraft accusations produce ultimate causes explaining misfortune, thereby reinforcing existing explanatory schemes that rely on witchcraft and sorcery.

Beliefs in witchcraft and sorcery are extremely deep and widespread. Not a day passes by without someone talking about it or taking protective measures against it. Lack of success, long-term illnesses and deaths are perceived to be grounded in someone else’s jealousy or greed. The limited access to medical facilities, and the fact that modern medicine does not convincingly address or even recognise social causation, tend to reinforce local explanatory schemes. AIDS might change the pattern of witchcraft accusations since, unlike other diseases, it is strongly defined as an acquired
syndrome and not as something which can be sent by a witch or a sorcerer. But it requires that the serological status be known.

In 2001, I visited the chief of a neighbouring village. He was complaining of serious health difficulties. Many Kwanja elites (including health agents) with whom I talked said that he was suffering from AIDS. A few months later, the chief’s matrilineage and a Mambila diviner accused several persons (one Kwanja chief from the plateau living in the same village as the sick chief, several notables, and one or two individuals who had a personal conflict with the chief). The sub-prefect of Bankim and the gendarmerie arrived in the village, organised a meeting in front of the palace, and publicly warned the dignitaries that they were known to be bewitching the chief and that they had to put an end to it right away, or be arrested. They were later summoned by the gendarmerie in Bankim to explain themselves. Most of them were released, but the chief from the plateau was arrested and jailed in Banyo. Later on, the chief underwent an AIDS test, which was positive. He declared in private that he would stop accusing people of witchcraft, but he did not do it publicly. The Kwanja chief from the plateau remained in jail in Banyo until his son bribed the police to free him. When the chief died, many people continued talking about witchcraft. However, the Kwanja deputy (member of parliament), arriving from Yaounde, declared publicly that the chief had died of AIDS and that all accusations of witchcraft had to be dropped. Many people blamed him for saying this in public.

Some people, knowing about their serological status, have already declared publicly that they were suffering from AIDS in order to discourage any accusation of witchcraft after their death. But although more than 20% of the sexually active population in the area of Bankim is infected, AIDS is still associated with stigma and shame, something that has been reinforced by missionary work and moralising prevention campaigns (Gausset 2001b). As a consequence, many people hide their serological status (or do not want to know it), preferring to spread witchcraft accusations rather than face the shame of being associated with immoral behaviour.

*Personal vengeance*

It is one thing to make a mistake when accusing someone – it is another thing to do it on purpose to discredit the accused person. It is well known, for example, that, after the death of a rich man, wid-
ows tend to be falsely accused by their in-laws of having murdered their husbands. This accusation reduces them to silence when in-laws share the inheritance and disregard the last will of the deceased in order to deprive widows and their children of a large part of inheritance. False accusations can also be made on purpose to discredit an opponent in any conflict of interest, not least in conflicts between jealous co-wives and lovers.

B was a widow and the lover of a married man, who started taking J (a divorced woman) as second lover. When B started having a swollen leg, she accused J of having hexed her and brought the accusation before the chief. J explained that she had been visiting her father G to ask him for a love potion to win the heart of her lover over B, but that G had no such potion. The chief was not convinced, and they all went to consult a Mambila diviner. The diviner accused G (who was a widower) of having bewitched B because she refused to love him. The diviner’s explanation was totally out of context, and B herself denied this explanation, saying that it was impossible, since G was the husband of her late elder sister and was therefore a joking partner who could not marry her without the consent of her family. Yet, the chief insisted that both G and J were guilty. G wanted to drink the poison ordeal to prove his innocence. But B, her family and the chief refused, and the case was brought before the court in Bankim. However, the chief gave the notice summoning G and J to appear in court only after the hearing had already taken place, which prevented them from defending their case.

The case was then transferred to Banyo, where G and J were jailed without being heard, presumably because of the influence of the elder brother of B, who was working as a clerk at the justice department in Banyo. There were four hearings during the first few months, then nothing happened for several months. J was pregnant by her lover and gave birth in jail, which allowed her to leave jail on condition that she remained in Banyo. G stayed in jail and, since nothing was happening, asked to be brought to the Sultan to take his poison ordeal (licking the sacred drums; see fig. 31), so that everybody would see whether or not he was telling the truth. This was denied him, but a prison guard took pity on G and went to the court to see what was happening to his case. He discovered that a final hearing had been called to settle the matter definitely, but that the paper had been blocked somewhere in the administration (again, presumably because of B’s brother working as a clerk in that department). The prison guard set the justice machinery in motion again, and a final hearing was called. However, it had to be postponed twice because the Mambila diviner, who had been summoned to court to testify, was absent. At the third attempt, they decided to carry on without the diviner. The judge could sense that the whole story was just a quarrel between
lovers and that G and J had been wrongly accused. When the judge asked B who had won and who had lost in this case, B answered that J had won the heart of her lover, while she herself had lost a healthy leg. The whole court laughed at this ridiculous statement, and this was a turning point that made B lose her case.

G and J were freed without bail one year after they had been jailed, and they returned to the village. B got her leg properly treated at the hospital, and it became clear to everyone that she had not been bewitched. Although people still wonder whether B genuinely thought that J was bewitching her, or whether she created a false accusation on purpose to send her competitor to jail, people have fewer doubts concerning the chief. In the meantime, he had been caught red-handed by one of his wives while making love to a widowed woman. That woman was someone whom G had approached to remarry, without knowing that the chief was after her too (if a woman sleeps with a chief, no one else can sleep with her). After this incident, people were convinced that, if the chief had testified so strongly against G, despite the weak evidence, it was because he knew that G and he loved the same woman and thus wanted to get rid of a competitor.

Today, J has won the heart of her lover over B. The lover of the chief has moved to a neighbouring village. The chief has apologised to G and
told him that he will protect him if anybody accuses him of anything. Despite the year spent in jail for nothing and the fact that he has come back broken by disease and malnutrition and is incapable of working in his fields anymore, G holds no grudge against anyone. He stayed so long in jail that weariness has replaced rancour. Even if he wanted revenge or was entitled to compensation for the slander and the year spent in jail, he would need money and the support of a strong and well-connected family to win anything, and he has neither. G has suffered a lot in his life, is expecting to suffer even more in the future, and is willing to accept his fate. The local emphasis on accumulating good *kârê* and avoiding resentment might also play a role in his forgiveness.

Villagers are well aware that many false rumours are spread in bars, when people are drunk. Rumours can spread extremely rapidly, doing widespread damage to someone reputation. Once this is done, accusations are just a formality, and many villagers take them uncritically as a proof of culpability in itself. As a result, people are extremely touchy and tend to react very strongly as soon as they hear the slightest insinuation of an accusation (of sorcery, witchcraft, adultery, misuse of collective funds, etc.) If accusations are not cleared up rapidly at the outset with solid counter-arguments, preferably with the backing of the close family or matrilineage of the accused person, they can spread as rumours and end up as accusations or, in the worst cases, can lead a crowd of villagers to ask for drastic measures. Once matters have already gone too far, few people dare to oppose this process and thus run the risk of being seen as an accomplice.

*Equality and difference*

Witchcraft and sorcery are grounded in jealousy, greed and anger. Jealous people are said to hex the successful. This is commonly suspected among brothers of different mothers, co-wives, chiefs and potential heirs, and so on. It explains why many local “rich” Kwanja are extremely secretive about their income and capital and choose to live as “poor” people, wearing old clothes, living in small houses, avoiding buying anything which might frame them as conspicuously showing their wealth and generate jealousy among
neighbours. Successful coffee-planters, businessmen and the educated elite fear that other people resent their success.

At the annual meeting of the CDRK (Comité de développement de la région Kwanja) in 1994, the president made a long speech trying to address what he identified as one of the main causes of underdevelopment in the region: witchcraft and sorcery grounded in jealousy. He explained that the urban elite (to whom he belonged) did not want to invest their money back home and build nice houses or shops because they were afraid that people would see this as an arrogant behaviour, or would be jealous of their success and would bewitch them. He then exhorted his fellow Kwanja to stop being jealous of wealthy people and bewitching them, so that they too could benefit from their investments.

Many of the elite avoid coming back to their home village. When they do so, they try to avoid sleeping there so as to minimise the risk of being bewitched. During my fieldwork, for example, I wanted to meet the Kwanja who had been elected as a member of parliament, but I always missed him since he arrived without warning late at night and left early the next morning during his rare visits to his old mother. His pattern of visits might reflect a fear of sorcery, or it might reflect his wish to avoid demands for help from all kinds of relatives and villagers. It is difficult to refuse the many demands of relatives or clients when one is a successful businessman and politician. Doing so inevitably creates frustration, which can lead to jealousy or resentment and to witchcraft and sorcery. Thus, witchcraft deriving from jealousy is often grounded in social difference and in the failure to redistribute wealth and status.

The misfortune of some can also be directly linked to the good fortune of others, since as noted already, successful people are believed to steal the wealth of unfortunate people, as in a zero-sum game. The back pain of a father becomes a symptom that his child has ridden him as a horse during the night. Failure at an examination explains the success of another student. The failure of one’s crop relates directly to the bumper harvest of a neighbouring field. The drought in a village explains the abundance of rain in the neighbouring village. The lack of interest that a husband shows in his wife has a magical origin and is inversely proportional to the affection that he shows to his co-wife. In these cases, the witches or
sorcerers (or their acquaintances) gain a material advantage. Their actions are explained by greed.

Finally, witchcraft and sorcery can be grounded in anger and resentment. Anyone who has quarrelled bitterly or who has a grudge against someone can be suspected of wanting to harm the opponent. A third person might also take this opportunity to harm one of the conflicting parties and get away with it, since the suspicion would automatically fall on the other party. This threat is feared at least as much as the threat coming from the conflict itself. In these cases, sorcery is not so much grounded in jealousy as in disagreement and bad temper.

We can deduce from this that witchcraft and sorcery accusations come from resentment. Where there is social peace and no hard feelings, there is no malevolence and no witchcraft. The fear of witchcraft is a powerful incentive to keep on good terms with others. Friendliness, hospitality, equanimity, humility, patience, compassion and care for others are highly valued characteristics of personality. People who stay “cool” in the face of conflict, who are not afraid of humbly asking for forgiveness, are more likely to be on good terms with many people, and to spare therefore both witchcraft attacks and witchcraft accusations. Social difference is an important source of resentment. Those who occupy a higher socio-economic position are either suspected of having arrived there by stealing others, or fearing that people are jealous and “want them down”. Witchcraft and sorcery thus constitute levelling mechanisms that prevent people from accumulating wealth (Fisiy and Geschiere 1990; Geschiere 1997). Even when witchcraft is seen as a means of accumulating wealth, rich people are compelled either to hide their wealth or to redistribute it so as to avoid both witchcraft accusations and witchcraft attacks.

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88 Dignitaries and chiefs are exceptions. A chief should be the wealthiest person in the village. In principle, nobody can have a tin-roof or a car if the chief does not have one. The chief’s wealth does not derive from harmful practices but comes from the villagers who work in the chief’s fields, build his palace, and collect money to buy him items that will make him “rich”. As in many other parts of Cameroon, the level of “development” of a village is generally measured by looking at the chief’s “palace” and wealth.
Conclusions

As we have seen, there is a great variety of ways in which misfortune happens and is understood. It might relate to health (with a great variety of symptoms) or livelihood. It might strike individuals or communities. The victims might be commoners, or have a specific status that is relevant when interpreting the misfortune: hunters, babies, schoolchildren, widows, or pregnant women. The affliction might be progressive or sudden. It can be interpreted as resulting from witchcraft, sorcery, curses, a breach of taboos or social conflicts. It might originate with humans, ancestors or spirits, or by sheer accident. It might be dealt with by seeking refuge among matrigin, chief’s anti-witchcraft curses, rituals or medicines, and at either the individual or collective level. This might happen at a variety of scales, from individual misfortune, to lineage problems, to global catastrophies.\(^8\) All the case studies discussed in this chapter

\(^8\) The scale of misfortune is generally perceived to be linked to the scale of transgression, conflict or disorder. Just as one says that an individual’s heart is “hot” when he or she is jealous or angry, a lineage or a village might also be said to be “hot” when it is riddled by conflict and struck by misfortune. Having a child whose upper teeth come first announces only one death and is less dangerous than leprosy, which threatens the whole matrilineage, or an eclipse, which is a bad omen for an entire region. Transgressing a patrilineal taboo is dangerous for the trespasser only, while transgressing a chiefly taboo threatens the entire matrilineage or might lead to war between two chiefs. Personal conflict or individual misbehaviour explains individual misfortune. The misfortune of a lineage (numerous deaths, bad omens from ancestors) is explained either by conflicts within the group, or the transgression of serious taboos such as skinning a leopard without the consent of the chief. The collective misfortune of a village (epidemics, drought, the failure of a local market) is explained by reference to conflicts within the community or with a neighbouring chief practising sorcery (mgwéné), to the chief’s misbehaviour and bad temper, or to the transgression of the most important social rules, such as hitting one’s parents. The scale at which prevention mechanisms are implemented is proportional to the scale of the misfortune. Individual transgressions of food or ritual taboos are commonly solved by dignitaries, and personal misfortune is avoided by making individual sacrifices to ancestors. But diseases of the belly, the transgression of chiefly taboos, are more serious and imply the participation of a whole lineage in addressing the problem. Also, epidemics or collective misfortune implies the participation of the whole village and the chief when sacrificing to ancestors. The mechanisms remain the same but are more formal, more elaborate and imply the participation of more people.
are singular; no two cases of misfortune are perceived and treated in the same exact terms. And yet, behind this diversity, one finds regularities and coherence in the way the Kwanja understand and address misfortune. The infinite variety of possible events is, in practice, understood in relation to a limited number of ultimate causes and addressed using a limited number of strategies. Unpredictability thus coexists with regularities and patterns, which makes the Kwanja’s construction of misfortune different from the Western point of view.

The authority with which I claim to be able to analyse these phenomena derives from my own involvement in such processes. I have been taught to follow taboos for my own good. I have witnessed the burials of people who have died with a big belly, whose funerals had to be organised without shedding any tears. I have been accused of practising sorcery myself and have had to learn quickly the rules of the game in responding to such accusations. I have almost cursed people and have experienced the type of social response that this triggers. My close friends and family members have been involved in various conflicts, and I have spent much time and energy in trying to solve them, thereby learning the types of action and discourse that were acceptable, and those that were not.

Of course, given the diversity of practices, it is impossible to account for all the details, and it is necessary to simplify the complexity in order to grasp it. I could have given even more information about the various types of transgressions, taboos, omens, sorcery, the different modes of acquisition of sorcery, or the recipes that people use to protect themselves. But what I have presented should suffice to understand the internal logic of the field of misfortune that presents it as the result of natural or social disorders, regardless of the variety of forms that misfortune might take. On the one hand, natural disorders arise from boundary crossing or abominations and are prevented by following a number of prescriptions, by offerings and rituals, and by reacting strongly to anomalies. On the other hand, social disorders are grounded in greed, jealousy and anger leading to conflicts, and are prevented by keeping on good terms with everyone, cooling down hearts heated by resentment, and avoiding conspicuously showing off one’s wealth.
Obviously, choosing this type of focus, inspired by Lévi-Strauss (1962a, 1962b) and Mary Douglas (1966), gives only a partial view of the field of misfortune, and is blind to other types of approaches. I could have analysed misfortune very differently, had I focused instead on, say, personal experiences of suffering, health trajectories, what it means to try to access medical services in the poorest province of a developing country, etc. But I have rather chosen to focus on the way misfortune is constructed, understood and prevented, which has allowed me to show that although rules and structures exist and frame misfortune, knowledge of them is not enough to predict the outcome of their application. The decision to understand failure or disorder according to one specific cause (jealousy, resentment, abomination, transgression, curses) and to address it by means of a specific strategy (using protective magic, public accusation, chief’s curse, rituals, cooling people’s hearts, mitigating conflicts, etc.) will always depend on the context and on each individual’s experience and status. It is the coexistence of concurrent rules that engenders complexity and unpredictability.
CHAPTER 6

MORAL ECONOMY

Refusing to pay 100 CFA for monthly access to clean water from a pump, sleeping on the floor of one’s kitchen to accommodate strangers as guests, living several months without having five francs in one’s pocket, gendarmes racketeering people unashamedly at a roadblock, teachers doing overtime to prepare their students for an exam, even though they have received no salary in the past six months, the widespread solidarity of lineage members during a funeral, the mobilisation of an entire village to carry sand and stone for a school, the fear of villagers when the chief threatens to curse their fields – these are some of the forms of behaviour which will inevitably seem disconcerting to a Western observer living among the Kwanja. Having outlined, in the previous chapters, the social organisation of the Kwanja, I will now move on to discuss how this impacts on everyday interactions between individuals who exchange goods and services in the market, within networks of solidarity, in collective work, or in hierarchical relations. Describing these interactions will demonstrate the importance of understanding the kinship system, the political structure, and the history of the Kwanja. It will also lead to a discussion of their legitimacy, thereby relativizing the notion of corruption.

The morality of exchange

Economic anthropology has been developed from a variety of perspectives, many of which have in common the rejection of simplistic rational choice theory – the idea that people always try to maximise their private advantage – and stress instead the importance of the morality of exchange. Mauss (1925), for example, distinguishes between the immediate exchange of impersonal things, and the gift and delayed counter-gift of personalised things. The gift is not made for monetary gain, but it initiates new social relations by call-
ing for reciprocity in the future. Refusing to receive a gift amounts to rejecting the social relationship and might lead to conflict. Accepting the gift but failing to reciprocate creates social debts and social hierarchies. Sahlins (1972) builds on this to distinguish between negative reciprocity (in which one takes – or “steals” – without giving anything in exchange), balanced reciprocity (in which one receives roughly the same as one gives, as in barter) and generalised reciprocity (in which one shares everything one has, in solidarity with everyone else). Polanyi (1957) introduces the idea that there exist different types of money applying to different spheres of exchanges (see also Bohannan 1959 and Barth 1967). Among the Tiv, for example, prestigious items, such as slaves, cattle, political titles or medicines, are exchanged with one another, but not with food crops in the sphere of subsistence (Bohannan 1959). A third sphere concerns rights in people (wives and offspring), which cannot be exchanged for food or cattle. Exchanges within each sphere are regulated differently, although brass rods constitute a common currency allowing people to convert items from one sphere to another one. Kopytoff (1986) pushes this line of thought further by distinguishing between commodities that can be bought and sold freely and those that are so individualised that they escape from the sphere of the market and cannot be exchanged – with a whole range of possibilities in between these two extremes.

All these anthropologists (and many others) focus on the moral economy, presenting exchange as embedded in social relations and obligations. The present chapter is inscribed within this tradition. But instead of focusing on the things exchanged, their quality or the balance of exchange, it focuses instead on the different types of social obligations that are found in exchanges. Moreover, it adopts a pragmatic method that takes as point of departure consequences rather than principles (James 1975: 28-32; Diggins 1994: 134) and thus defines different social obligations in terms of the sanctions that follow their breach rather than of the rules that should be followed. In other words, it defines social obligations by the practical difference that it makes for actors to follow or change the rules of the game. In the words of Shore and Haller (2005: 8): “If anthropology is concerned with understanding the rules and norms that govern social conduct, then a good way of exploring
these codes is to examine instances where they are violated, how people react to such transgressions, and the strategies and tactics that actors use to negotiate between different norms and rules”. But unlike pragmatists, who distinguish principles from consequences in order to put the last first (James 1975: 46-7), I see both as two sides of the same coin, since this involves defining principles by the type of effects they generate.

**Four pragmatic obligations framing exchange**

At least four types of rule or obligation determining exchange can be distinguished according to different mechanisms and different sanctions punishing those who do not abide by the rule.

**Contractual obligation**

A contract is here defined as an agreement between two or more parties, through which they willingly agree to exchange goods and services under certain conditions. Most of the goods and services that are exchanged contractually are different in nature: what is acquired is different from what is given. The agreement or contract can be very short and simple (selling or buying a beer) or it can be the object of long negotiations and sometimes run over generations (borrowing land from a lineage). It can be impersonal (bargaining with strangers in a market) or deeply linked to persons (marriage contracts). But in all cases, failing to abide by the agreement leads to a breach of contract, which is usually dealt with either by an appeal to authority to force the failing party to fulfil its contractual obligations, or by restoring the pre-contractual situation through reimbursing what has been exchanged or the payment of some compensation if it has been consumed. What is at stake in a breach of contract is often more than a material benefit or loss: it is also the credibility of the parties involved, and therefore their ability to make future contracts with other people.

Contracts exist at all levels. In interpersonal interaction, apart from trade, contracts are found when a parent gives a small
salary to a child working in the fields, when a woman cooks food for her lover and receives small gifts of clothes or money in exchange before or after sexual relations, or when someone bribes a civil servant to get a new birth certificate. It also exists between groups, when defining the boundary between two chiefdoms, or when voting for someone because of his donation or promises of development. Marriage contracts involve both individuals who must live up to their marital duties, and groups (lineages) that contract long-term alliances. If the contract is breached at the individual level (through adultery, domestic violence, a failure to provide resources or sexual services, for example) or at the lineage level (through accusations of witchcraft or some other type of serious conflict between lineages), the matter is either brought before a chief, who will try to get those involved to abide by their marital contracts, or else the marriage is dissolved in order to restore the pre-contract situation.  

**Mutual obligation**

Here a mutual obligation is defined as the obligation to treat others as others treat oneself. It does not mean that the interacting parties need to be strictly even and to give back exactly what they received – the exchange may focus on the quality or accessibility of a service rather than on the quantity of things or services. What is exchanged might be goods or money, as in the case of a tontine in which every participant must give the same amount of money and take turns to take the total. However, the exchange is not just material but also social, as when members of the same matrilineage have an obligation to help one another in case of need. Failure to treat others as they treat oneself leads to the suspension of services given by others, or to exclusion from the network of mutual partners, a sanction.

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90 Although a married couple constitutes an economic unit that farms, lives and raises children together, a marriage does not imply the total merging of the husband’s and wife’s private interests. Men and women remain very independent from one another and usually maintain separate fields, granaries and economies. A wife buys corn from her husband to prepare maize beer, and the husband buys the beer from his wife like anybody else.
that abides by the spirit of mutuality, since one refuses to help those who refuse to help. What is at stake in the breach of a mutual obligation is much more than a material gain or loss: it is the equality of partners in sharing the same rights and duties vis-à-vis one another.

Mutual obligations are found at the interpersonal level, in the mutual care of kin and friends, or in the basic mutual respect that one should show towards others in peaceful interactions. Such obligations are stronger between nephews-nieces and uncles-aunts, who can, for example, take any object they like from one another (clothes, a radio, etc.) without even asking permission, as they should not be jealous of one another and should share what they have. Sacrificing to ancestors is a mutual obligation in which one remembers and gives to the dead as they remember and give to oneself (the abundance is not proportional to the quantity or quality of food and drink sacrificed, but rather to the regularity and frequency of the sacrifices). Mutual obligation is the cornerstone of matrilineal solidarity, of the link between ndiyndi and cør and of joking partners at all levels of social interaction. The prohibition of incest can also be seen as a global mutual obligation establishing the foundation of matrimonial exchange.

*Moral obligation*

Moral obligations are defined according to local values, in terms of good or bad behaviour. The sanction consists typically in a moral judgement, reprobation and ostracism leading to shame. For example, thieves are seldom asked to compensate their victims if they have already consumed the object stolen (as would be the case in a contractual obligation). Being the victim of theft does not confer the right to steal back (as would be the case in a mutual obligation). Thieves are not banned from the village or from any group of mutual help. What is at stake here is not so much a material benefit or loss (although good blessings and good fortune usually follow rightful behaviour), but rather people’s reputations and their status in society. What drives people to behave morally is the wish to be judged as righteous. Hospitality towards foreigners and charity with the destitute are ruled by moral obligations, as they are done with-
out hoping that the recipient of the help might reciprocate one day. Respecting the integrity of other peoples’ property and bodies, that is, adopting “respectful behaviour” (being hard working, avoiding being drunk in public, avoiding the conspicuous display of wealth), is also defined in moral terms. Moral obligations are not entered into to gain a material benefit, but to gain good conscience and the feeling of being righteous, although they might sometimes call implicitly for counter-gifts. Someone who is overwhelmed by the hospitality of his host or by the good service of a civil servant, for example, might gratify him with some money to thank him (see Olivier de Sardan 1999: 46; Blundo and Olivier de Sardan 2001: 13).

The hospitality, charity, dedication, and respectful behaviour characteristic of moral obligations are found at all levels of social interaction. The hospitality given to occasional travellers differs only in degree from that shown to neighbours coming to participate in a funeral or masquerade. The obligation to redistribute wealth applies to the destitute, but also to the person who wins a tontine and organises a party to celebrate, or for a whole village organising its harvest festival and entertaining hundreds of guests. “Respecting oneself” (avoiding being drunk, behaving decently) and “respecting others” (avoiding committing adultery or stealing from others) applies to all, although such offences are much more serious when applied to chiefs than to commoners.

*Hierarchical obligation*

Hierarchical obligations rest on the principle that one must obey those who occupy a higher position and have authority over oneself. The sanction for not following an order is usually physical coercion – a father beating his child for not being obedient, a chief cursing or banning a villager for not giving him the skin of a leopard, an administration imprisoning a citizen for failing to pay the poll-tax. The higher party imposes his will on the lower one, who must obey or risk being violently punished. What is at stake is much more than a personal material benefit or loss; disobedience constitutes first and foremost a threat to the social hierarchy – a hierarchy that is protected and reaffirmed through the sanction. People with formal
authority have the legitimate monopoly of violence to deal with conflicts that happen at their level of interaction.

Hierarchical obligations are found each time there is a social hierarchy, and it works similarly at any level of the hierarchy, from the lowest to the highest. Young children must respect their elders and obey when they ask a small service without asking anything in return. The authority of a father over his children and the respect that he enjoys from them is not very different from the relationship linking a chief and his villagers, a sultan and his subjects, or a state and its citizens.

Other types of obligation

The four types of obligation mentioned above are the most significant in understanding what happens among the Kwanja. But one could mention other obligations, such as legal ones based on a codified and impersonal system of rules that are mechanistically sanctioned by blind administrative machinery. Legal obligations have a tendency to codify the four other types of obligation discussed in this chapter (which makes them redundant in the present discussion) and to replace their contractual, mutual, moral and hierarchical sanctions by legal and administrative ones. Moreover, legal obligations exist more on paper than in reality and do not play an important role in the lives of the Kwanja except when they deal with the administration – something they try to avoid as much as possible. That said, legal obligations can also be based on customary law, as we have seen with some examples in previous chapters (with regard to inheritance, adultery with a chief’s wife, showing disrespect to parents, etc.).

One could also mention religious obligations based on taboos whose breaches call down mystical sanctions, but these too will be left out of the present analysis, as they are not social and have in any case been covered in Chapter 5. In the following, I will focus on contractual, mutual, moral and hierarchical obligations.
Ideal types and complexity

The obligations described in this chapter should be understood as ideal types, as, in practice, they are often mixed, and the distinctions between them are not always clear-cut. For example, contracts have some mutuality in them, as both parties must abide by the same rule. There is also some form of moral obligation to fulfil a contract and be considered a righteous person. Finally, one can appeal to an authority to force one party to fulfil its part of the contract. Yet, the central characteristic of contracts remains the specific agreement from which both parties derive different benefits and the obligation to abide by the agreement unless the pre-agreement situation should be restored.

A mutual obligation also has some elements of contract in it, as it is based on willing agreement between different parties, as well as having a moral aspect because it is considered immoral to be helped always while refusing to help others. It may also link to hierarchical obligations, as in the case of patron-client relations that are primarily based on mutual obligations but create a hierarchy. However, failing to reciprocate in a network of mutual exchange seldom leads to shame, coercion or to the services or goods received being taken back, but rather to exclusion from the network of beneficiaries. Even a patron cannot coerce a client into doing something against his will – he can only threaten to stop supporting the client in times of need.

Even though hospitality is generally grounded in a moral obligation, it can sometimes be determined by a sense of mutual obligation. The solidarity displayed with needy travellers is partly based on the belief that they would do the same at home with needy strangers. People belonging to groups that are reputed to be inhospitable, such as the Bamoun, can be asked to pay for the food and accommodation provided – just as they are said to do with travellers in their home area. Individual Kwanja known for being stingy and for refusing to give food to visitors tend to refuse the offer when they are invited, as they would feel ashamed to benefit from it while refusing it to others. One might also call upon an authority to sanction physically or materially someone displaying repeated immoral behaviour. Yet, disregarding moral obligations does not generally
mean being excluded from services or being asked for compensation, but rather to social disapprobation and shame.

Finally, a hierarchical obligation is not just one-way. The higher party has a responsibility towards the lower party and has contract-like obligations to fulfil – for example, a chief must be fair in resolving conflicts, must protect the village from witchcraft and epidemics, and must provide abundance and fertility. He must also behave morally, like his subjects, and must use his power for the common good rather than for private ends. Contractual and moral aspects play a big role in making a hierarchy legitimate or not. Yet, the hierarchy rests primarily on the legitimate monopoly of force, and coercion is the typical sanction for the breach of a hierarchical obligation.

Although these four different rules (contractual, mutual, moral and hierarchical) and four different types of consequence (return to pre-contract situation, exclusion from the network of equal partners, shame, and coercive punishment) may be found in all societies, they apply differently according to the actions involved and the socio-cultural context. The different blend of obligations characterizing different fields of activity can explain the feeling of strangeness that a “foreign observer” may experience when doing fieldwork in another cultural context. In what follows, I will give three practical examples of how the Kwanja combine these four types of obligation to construct the fields of market and credit, clientelism and corruption, and local developments which, although they might seem familiar at first sight to a Western observer, can end up being very different from expectations. This will lead to putting the concept of corruption into perspective and question its universal definition, since deciding which rule or ethics should (or should not) apply in a given context depends on the legitimacy of the rules, i.e. on a local consensus that might be changing.

**Production, market and credit**

Classical economics holds that people always try to maximise their private advantage through contractual exchanges and that the collective outcome of such private enterprise is positive. Such strate-
gies are presented within the framework of trade or contractual obligations. Although anthropologists have shown that such an approach is reductionist and that economic exchanges are also strongly moral in character (see the beginning of this chapter), this does not mean that the maximisation of profit through contractual exchanges should be rejected. Of course, Kwanja farmers do try to maximise profit by investing to produce more and by selling and buying in the most advantageous circumstances. They try to predict the demand and to supply it in the most profitable manner. This is easier with products that are consumed locally (maize, bananas, manioc, yams, oil palm), whose demand is stable and whose price depends on the level of supply (low prices in times of bumper harvest, high prices when the harvest is poor). It is more difficult for cash crops exported abroad (coffee, groundnut), which can be very profitable, but whose price depends on unstable global markets. While it is quite safe to speculate on products that are consumed locally and whose prices rise until the next harvest, it is much riskier to speculate on cash crops, since prices sometimes collapse unexpectedly as time goes by (influenced by harvests in other parts of the world that are difficult to predict), leaving speculating farmers increasingly desperate. This mechanism is sometimes reinforced by the fact that buyers of cash crops are more numerous after the harvest (thus competing with one another, which pushes prices up) while the rare buyers who come later are in a position of monopoly and can buy cash crops at relatively lower prices. As often, benefiting from the market is much easier for the rich, who can invest more easily in agricultural inputs, hire labour to produce more, wait the right time to sell their products, and resist economic crisis. The poor, on the other hand, are usually short of cash and often forced to sell agricultural products just after the harvest when prices are low. Thus, contractual obligations do play a major role in local investment, production and marketing. Yet, as I will argue in what follows, many aspects of the market (such as agricultural production, recruiting labour, buying and selling drinks, accessing credit or accumulating wealth) escape contractual obligations or the maximisation of private benefit and require an understanding in terms of mutual, moral, and hierarchical obligations.
Farming

Farming, fishing and hunting are not just questions of producing as much as possible of the best possible goods in order to maximize income. Being a successful farmer is also a moral obligation. Everybody wishes to succeed in farming and in hunting or fishing, not just because it is the main strategy to maximise profit, but also because failure brings shame, thus implying that being a good farmer is a moral obligation. This ideal is far from the reality, since about half of all Kwanja households fail to produce enough food for themselves and their families through farming. They usually make up the shortfall with activities such as hunting, trading or taking minor jobs (as masons or in other crafts, or working on contract in the fields of others). There are, however, a few people who produce hardly anything for themselves and survive mainly from working in other people’s fields rather than in their own, buying the food that they consume from what they earn. Such people (men as well as women) tend to spend a large part of their earnings on alcohol and to be divorced, as they are unable to meet their duties vis-à-vis their spouse. They also tend to rely more strongly on the solidarity of relatives in times of sickness. This way of life is considered a failure and is disapproved of by most other villagers, who judge it by the moral standards of the successful farmer who is able to meet his or her social obligations.

Working parties

Far from building on selfish competition, being a successful farmer often requires a strong web of solidarity. Most farmers rely heavily on working parties (lərənɪ) in which one prepares maize beer and some food and invites all the people working in one’s area to come and work in one’s fields (to clear a field or weed it). Collective work is seen as lighter and more pleasurable than working alone in one’s fields, as there is a small feast with social drinking and drums. The system relies on a sense of mutual obligation, since those who do not organise any working parties themselves tend not to participate in others’, and since those who do not participate in others’
working parties do not have many participants when they try to organise one themselves. Collective work is also a way of spreading the risk linked to health. Old or sick people depend heavily on this system, and for them, the obligation is more moral than mutual since they are too weak to reciprocate. Chiefs also rely heavily on this system, as they are not supposed to work in their fields. In this case, the obligation is hierarchical (although the chief must still serve beer and food to everyone), since the chief is not allowed to reciprocate and work in other people’s fields.

The marketing of drinks

If the local grain market is determined by supply and demand, the market for local drinks is quite different. First, giving water for free to any visitor is a basic piece of hospitality – a moral and mutual obligation. Secondly, the price of local alcoholic beverages is mostly determined by mutual obligations. The prices of palm wine, maize beer and distilled alcohol do not follow the contractual law of supply and demand, since they remain surprisingly stable over long periods of time, despite inflation, wide yearly fluctuations in the price of raw materials and the unsatisfied demand for some products. In most Kwanja villages, palm wine has been selling for 100 CFA per litre for the past 25 years, despite inflation and devaluation, and even though it is a product in very high demand everywhere. One must often order wine in advance to have some (when organising a ritual, for instance). In the rare cases when supply exceeds demand, producers drink the difference. The local explanation for this situation refers to mutual obligations. Most palm wine-tappers are also consumers, and they want to buy at the same price as they sell.

A few years after the devaluation, a Yamba tried to sell one litre of palm wine for 125 CFA. People were very angry and refused to buy from him. They said that people had always sold one litre for 100 CFA, and why would he now want to change the price? One day, when the Yamba wanted to buy one litre from someone else to drink, the seller said that he sold his wine for 100 CFA to everyone, but the Yamba would be an exception and have to pay 125 CFA, because that was what he was ask-
ing for the same product. The Yamba became angry and ashamed and he stopped selling any wine in the village.

Likewise, the price of maize beer has also been the same for decades, at 25 CFA for a calabash, despite the fact that the price of corn can double within a few months of the harvest. Instead of changing the price of beer according to the market price of corn, women use smaller calabashes and stop giving any credit or free calabashes when maize is expensive. Likewise, when women distill maize beer to make a strong maize alcohol, they always sell it at the fixed price of 100 CFA per glass, which has remained unchanged since the 1980s, despite inflation and the fluctuations in the price of maize. Yet, people claim that it is when the price of maize is high that women make a lot of profit, as demand exceeds supply and the women no longer give free glasses to customers (akin to a moral obligation in times of abundance) and no longer give credit.

**Credit**

Credit is another sector of activity in which mutual and moral obligations coexist with contractual ones. A person in need can always try to borrow money from individuals and promise to pay back with interest. But few people are likely to agree to lend money (unless they are mutually forced to do so, as is the case between relatives) because they know all too well that the needs of the poor are so acute that they will have huge difficulties in paying it back. The mutual obligation to help needy relatives is usually the main reason given to explain why few Kwanja run a shop in Kwanja villages, and why such trade is controlled by non-Kwanja. When a Kwanja opens a shop, relatives will invariably try to take goods on credit, which is difficult to refuse. These debts will seldom be repaid later. As the obligation to help depends on the need, there is a mutual obligation to give to needy relatives if one can, but there is no mutual obligation to give back if the lender is not in acute need of help. Paying back a debt is a contractual obligation, and contractual obligations come second to mutual obligations. Foreign traders do not have this problem, as they live far from their relatives.
The poor are often forced to sell grain just after the harvest, when the price is low, in order to buy medicine or to pay for school uniforms, even when they do not have enough food for themselves and must buy grain later on when the price is higher, which in practice makes the grain market a kind of credit institution in itself. But the most formal and most popular credit schemes are the tontines, which are immensely popular in western Cameroon and are now becoming so in other parts of the country too. In a tontine, the same group of people meets at fixed intervals (once per week, for example), and each member contributes with a fixed amount of money. The total sum of money is received by one member at a time, until all the members have had a turn. These tontines are based on mutual obligations; the peer pressure (and fine) is very heavy against those who skip one meeting. Only those people who have a regular monetary income dare to participate in them. They therefore tend to be rarer in villages and more popular in urban settings. There is another type of “tontine” that is, in fact, a classic savings scheme in which people meet at regular intervals and put any amount they want to save on their account. Membership is flexible, and people can save as much money as they wish or even quit saving, although they can only collect the money saved at the end of the year. Members can then borrow money in the savings scheme and repay it at a fixed rate of interest. The profit derived from the interest and from the fines levied on the members who misbehave during the meetings (arrive late, chatter, have overdue loans) is used to buy food and organise a party at the end of the year. Savings schemes are based on contractual obligations, but the moral pressure to pay back a loan in a savings scheme is much higher than the pressure to pay back a loan to a friend or relative, which makes the collective schemes safer credit institutions than private banks. Moreover, such local schemes also create social activities based on moral obligations, if not at every meeting, at least at the end of the year.

Displaying wealth

It is a moral duty to be a successful farmer and to sustain one’s family, but at the same time, one should not be too successful – or at
least, one should not display accumulated wealth. The pursuit of profit and success is counterbalanced by a strong emphasis on sharing with relatives and on equality among villagers. As we have seen in the fifth chapter, inequality is thought to trigger jealousy and resentment, and therefore witchcraft and sorcery. Being much richer than others is often perceived to be the result of immoral occult practices (ṣeyewen ọrọ mgbàtìbì) and is akin to theft – people enrich themselves by magically stealing other people’s success and wealth. Successful people are therefore morally compelled either to hide their success or to satisfy the needs of those relatives who are less successful. This has different consequences.

First, rich people tend to keep a low profile and to live like the poor. They hide their income and property, sometimes even from their own children, fearing jealousy and sorcery, or unlimited demands from relatives if people knew how much money they had. This creates problems, as the lack of any witness to their ownership makes it less secure. I heard, for example, several stories of Kwanja who had invested money in cattle kept for them by Fulbe herders. Such transactions remained secret and, as a result, no recourse was possible if the herders disappeared one day with all the animals or if the farmer died suddenly, leaving his heirs ignorant about how much cattle was kept where.

Secondly, rich people tend to be besieged by all the needy asking for money. Some dare to refuse bluntly and face moral reprobation, curses or being cut from networks of solidarity. Others give if they have, but try to limit what they have so as to limit what they give. There are two main strategies to limit what one has. One can either spend money as soon as one earns it, a strategy used by many poor people to cover their needs. Or else one can invest money in goods or animals, or sink it in annual saving schemes. Spending, saving and investing are quite different strategies, but they all share the common advantage of leaving people without ready cash and protecting them from any unrealistic or embarrassing demands from a neighbour or a relative, since being empty-handed enables them to refuse their help to greedy or needy people, as well as giving them a good excuse for borrowing from those who have cash. Whether “rich” or hard-core poor, most Kwanja people seem to be always short of money and to be in acute need of cash.
Many people live on credit, as people in need will always find someone who has some money and who can be convinced to lend it (on the basis of some kinship tie). Long chains of credit therefore come into existence, with people promising to repay their debts when those who owe them money repay their own (often a convenient excuse for refusing to repay one’s own debt, even if money is available). Both refusing loans to others and failing to repay one’s debt create numerous conflicts (when someone dies, his or her creditors must make the debt public during the burial, for example). Those showing bad faith in repaying usually get away with it, as their relatives or neighbours give up in fear of creating resentment between themselves and the defaulting payer. Again, if lending money to relatives, friends or needy people is a mutual or moral obligation, repaying it is only a contractual obligation, which, as already noted, comes second to moral obligations.

**Clientelism and corruption**

On every trip to Cameroon, I have been exposed to civil servants or employees trying to extort money from me. Some at the airport tried to make me believe that my luggage would not be on the plane unless I gave them money. Custom officers tried to convince me that I could not bring any money out of the country and that I had to leave everything with them. I was the object of intense scrutiny from the police trying to find the slightest problem with my visa, vaccination, driving license or car. Most of the time, policemen at road blocks were just asking for money without even trying to find any excuse – asking for a cadeau (gift), a “bonne année” around New Year’s Eve, or saying that checking cars under the sun made them thirsty. My status as a European university researcher able to claim good connections with ministers, sultans, or missionaries has always helped me to escape such requests, something which is much more difficult for my Cameroonian friends.

Corruption, nepotism and clientelism are some of the characteristics which western administrators and businessmen commonly associate with African politics. They tend to be condemned without much discussion. Yet, they are deeply embedded in a moral economy (Olivier de Sardan 1999) that should be understood before it is condemned or combated.
A state is commonly judged on its ability to deliver goods and services to those who are legally entitled to benefit from them – primarily its citizens. As this judgment is made in terms of good or bad, and sanctioned by both local and international disapprobation or shame, the obligations of the state can be described as being moral in nature. From that point of view the failure of the Cameroonian state is obvious, since for several years it has been considered one of the most corrupt countries in the world.

“Corruption” is everywhere, to such an extent that it is practised openly, with all kinds of civil servants (from communal secretaries and policemen to maires or court magistrates) openly and unashamedly admitting to accepting money for their services (see also Alou 2001; Bako-Arifari 2001; Blundo and Olivier de Sardan 2001). They legitimise this by arguing that everybody does the same, from the lowest to the highest levels of the administration, and that they would be fools not to follow the trend. Some even claim to be compelled to give a fixed amount of money to their superiors every month, who give a percentage to their superiors, and so on, in a well-organised system, and therefore to have a choice between taking bribes or losing their jobs. Finally, many argue that they are forced to take bribes because their salary is not enough to maintain their families. The deep economic crisis of the beginning of the 1990s certainly did much to spread corruption. The salaries of most civil servants (except the police and military) were reduced by about 75%, and the CFA lost half of its value. On top of this, salaries remained unpaid for months on end. In this context, civil servants were unable to face up to their obligations, such as buying food for the household, paying school fees for their children or repaying housing or car loans. Taking bribes then became a strategy to maintain their standards of living.

From legal/moral to contractual obligations

One day, I visited a Kwanja friend working as a customs officer at Douala airport. While I was chatting with him in his office, two of his agents brought in a woman with her luggage filled with cosmetics. My friend insisted that taxes on cosmetics had to be paid – that was the rule. The woman, who was heavily pregnant, started crying and explained be-
tween her sobs that her husband had left her, that she was trying to help her sister, that her life was miserable, etc. After twenty minutes of arguments, my friend, visibly exhausted by the exchange, told his agents: “Do whatever you want with her; I’m not looking”. The agents suddenly turned away from their submissive attitude towards their boss and adopted the usual arrogant and threatening tone of corrupt gendarmes, asking her to give them 10,000 CFA (about half the sum she would have paid in taxes). She paid, wiped her eyes, and walked out of the office a free person.

During the 1990s, access to state services shifted from being ruled by fixed legal or moral obligations defined in terms of laws, rights and merit to flexible contractual ones. Today, anybody controlling access to information, resources or power can try to negotiate his services contractually, according to supply and demand. Civil servants develop new strategies to reinforce their control over a resource and to create a monopoly situation by making themselves indispensable. Some deliberately disorganise their office so well that only they can find a document in it. Others keep any valuable information to themselves so that anybody wishing to access it must pass through them. New rules are constantly being invented to make their breach more likely and open the way for new fines, and therefore new bribes. Any administrative resource becomes a commodity, including identity papers, the outcomes of court hearings, good marks at exams, diplomas, scholarships, jobs and promotions.

Structural adjustment programs (SAP) have encouraged the privatization of public services by ending state monopolies and introducing limited payments for health care, education and development. However, by legitimizing (indeed, making it compulsory) to pay contractually for access to public services, SAP have also encouraged a wide-ranging privatization of the public good to the benefit of civil servants. It has thus pushed to its limit the transformation of the state into a “‘market’ where office holders compete for the acquisition of benefit” (Turner 1978 in Lemarchand 1988: 153), something that is generally referred to as “corruption” (Bayart 1993: 74-83; McMullan 1961). One of the results was that the administrative job market has become a real (but informal) market in which jobs can be bought and sold. People borrow money to buy their place in national schools that train them to become administrators; they borrow money to buy scholarships, or to buy their nomi-
nation in the administration. They invest money in a diploma or a job, and their investment is proportional to the money that the position can generate, both through its salary and through the “illegal” marketing of its resources and services, then use these means to pay off their loans or investments as quickly as possible. This feeds inflation on the market of administrative posts and on the market of administrative services.

One of the advantages of these contractual obligations is that people can cope more easily with their administrative problems. It is, for example, easier for Kwanja children to enter secondary school, despite their age being above the limit (see the second chapter), or for nomadic Fulbe to acquire Cameroonian citizenship, even when they are born in Nigeria. Or it can be cheaper to do business, as in the case of fraud in the airport described above. The disadvantage is that those who cannot afford to pay for a service are kept out of it (those without identity papers and without the means to bribe policemen at roadblocks avoid travelling on the main roads, for example), or work many times harder than others to get a diploma and a job corresponding to their qualifications. People adapt their strategy to their means and to the conditions of the administrative market. As a result, they tend to avoid dealing with the state unless they are forced to do so or can access a service of benefit to them. For example, they avoid going to court to solve a conflict unless they know that they can buy a favourable outcome, as discussed in Chapter 1.

*From contractual to hierarchical obligations*

A young Kwanja presents himself to me and asks humbly if I have any job for him. I give him the task of mapping the fields of a Kwanja village on the plateau and to write a diary of the events that happen in his village, only to discover that he subcontracted both jobs to other peoples for a fraction of what I had agreed to pay. I heard later that his humility in front of me became arrogance in the village and that he used his working for me as a pledge to gain confidence, misuse people’s trust and take money from those who asked him to introduce their problems to me and intercede in their favour.
The privatization and contractualisation of administrative services might bring some benefit to civil servants and their clients, but they also bring many problems. First, the administration tends to become inflated and to become more expensive as more people try to obtain a piece of the administrative cake. As the system grows and becomes more opaque, those who benefit from it become at the same time its victims. I met several Kwanja civil servants who had taken bribes during their employment, but who had just retired and were now ruining themselves in bribes in order to be allowed to receive their legal pension. The problem is so serious that I also met several civil servants who did not even try to get the pension they were entitled to, as they calculated that it was not worth spending a lot of money in bribes and transport to the capital and still running the risk of getting nothing.

The number of civil servants might be officially reduced, but this does not reduce corruption, since this simply makes the state weaker (Szeftel 1998: 414-17) and since the system continues to produce either real brokers able to help find a way through the administration, or “parasites” who claim to be able to deliver a service which they do not control, but still use their position of power to threaten people and extort money from them. Those who find themselves in a weaker position because they do not exert full control over a resource and can be bypassed try to create a smokescreen of contradictory information mixed with threats in order to try to appear as unavoidable gatekeepers (see also Alou 2001: 76). Controlling information (or better still, making rules that can be changed at will) allows people to control ignorant “customers”; delivering access to them is the easy part and can always be sub-contracted to the real gatekeepers. The example of the young man described above is characteristic of such a strategy, as is the behaviour of the Sultan’s messengers (see fig. 32), who intimidate people in an agro-pastoral conflict into believing that they know how to influence the Sultan’s will, or of civil servants working at the airport and trying to make passengers believe that their luggage will not get on the plane unless extra money is paid. Such people are found everywhere, in isolated villages as much as in airports or ministries. They use threats and people’s naivety to make their victims pay for a service they cannot deliver. The longer the case, the more they can hope to earn
money, which encourages them to create further problems instead of solving them.  

Fig. 32: Messenger of the Sultan

91 McMullan (1961) argues that corruption is an integral part of a colonial literate administration ruling over an illiterate population, and that it has a tendency to criminalize standard or traditional behaviour. As we can see, even when a large part of the population is literate, one finds the same problem as those described in colonial times, since information might change regularly and might not be well-known to the population. And even if the legal rules were known, they might apply on paper only but not in practice, as contractual, mutual, moral and hierarchical obligations might take precedence over legal ones.
From being contractual, the obligation tends to become hierarchical, as people use their (real or invented) positions in a hierarchy to extort money, without delivering any service at all. Gendarmes stop looking for a problem with the cars they are checking, and ask bribes even for the newest and most flawless of cars, saying that “They don’t eat paper” (i.e. they only “eat money”) when presented with a vehicle’s papers without money. Such hierarchical obligations lacks any legitimacy because such office-holders have not been placed there by the people and are not working for the common good (unlike elected or traditional leaders), but have bought their positions on the job market, and because they use coercion to maximise their private benefit without delivering any service. People see them as a nuisance and their actions as organised racket that is deeply resented.

As a result, rural people try to avoid having to deal with the state as much as they can, or wish the state to leave them in peace. People become increasingly reluctant to pay taxes when they have to pay contractually for any service they get and when money is extorted from them for which they receive no service whatsoever (except escaping imprisonment). Significantly, most communes abolished the poll tax in the 1990s, and those who did not have great difficulties in collecting it. Communes now tend to focus on the contractual taxing of business and trade in exchange for licences. Most Kwanja also prefer to end a conflict by agreeing to a settlement or by bringing the case to a customary chief, rather than going to an official court to avoid becoming easy prey for those who work in the administration. Rich people can take advantage of the situation and refuse any settlement in favour of a poor opponent, challenging the victim to bring the matter to courts, and threatening the victim that one will bribe the administration in order to have the victim jailed or make him or her pay compensation to the rich opponent.

Given the ways in which “public” and “collective” resources and knowledge are being privatized and negotiated contractually, being on good terms with influential and well-positioned people is

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92 One of the most highly appreciated and dearly remembered achievements of the “villes mortes” insurrection at the beginning of the 1990s was that policemen were taken off the roads and stayed in their barracks!
of primordial importance for those who wish to find their way through the administration. Such people can help to access information regarding how the system works and who has the power to solve a problem. They can also help to short-circuit many lower-ranking civil servants who have a great capacity to block a file, although they have little capacity to deliver the resource. The transformation of the administrative system, by creating greater insecurity, encourages the establishment of patron-client relations.

*Patrons and clients*

During a festival, the dignitary of a neighbouring village bows with respect in front of me and asks, half serious, half jokingly: “Please patron, give me money to buy a beer”. I refuse half-jokingly too, saying that I am not employing him, so I cannot be his patron. He insists: “Yes, yes, you are my patron! Please patron, give me money because I am thirsty”. I insist too, replying that he is the local host and I am his guest. Now, is it the guest who should give drink to his host or the opposite? Moreover, he is a notable and I am just a commoner. So how can I be his patron when he is above me? He then answers: “But of course you are my patron. If I have a problem, I know that you will always help me, won’t you? Of course you will. You will not let me down. I would do the same for you. Please patron, *pardon*, give me money for a beer”.

One day I met a wealthy and educated Fulbe and spent some time with him trying to understand agro-pastoral conflicts from a cattle-herder’s perspective. The next day, he brought the back leg of a cow and gave it to me. I wanted to pay but he refused, saying that it was a gift. The day after, he came back with two litres of fresh milk, which he started to bring on an almost daily basis, always refusing my money and refusing my request to stop bringing them to me. I was beginning to feel embarrassed by the fact that I was owing someone who was ostensibly despising my Kwanja friends, family or interpreters, and who was known to be a trouble-maker (he was arrested a few years later for highway robbery). I suspected him of trying to win my support so that I would take his side against the Kwanja he was having serious conflicts with. He then brought me a second back leg, just after I had already bought fresh meat. As I could neither store the meat nor eat that much, and as he could not accept my refusal, I gave the leg directly to my “mother”, saying that it was for her, and thanking the Fulbe for this. From then on, he stopped bringing me gifts.
Patron-client relations are based on gifts or services given for free that create social bonds on which one can rely to derive influence, support or protection. They can be created at the initiative of a politician or chief who wishes to gain more authority but, more often than not, they are started at the initiative of those who seek personal benefit or protection in exchange of gifts or potential support in relation to a future problem. I was under heavy pressure during my fieldwork to become a patron and both to give and receive gifts from people who wished to win my support and generosity. Although I initially tried to keep out of such relationships, things changed when I understood that I could derive protection from such networks, as well as influence I could use to advance the progress of village projects. While civil servants try to free themselves from their moral obligations either to sell their services in a contractual way or to use their power to extort money without giving anything in return, patrons and clients are locked into mutual obligations towards one another. The whole system of patronage works on the basis of mutual alliances between people who can help one another and through the idea that a gift or a service provided for free creates a debt that will require future reciprocity such as help in times of need. Those who receive today will have to give something another day. The obligation is mutual, and the patron is at the same time the client of his own clients, as he too must deliver goods or support in times of need.

In 2001, I visited the Sultan of Banyo just before Ramadan. I had been told that I should always bring a gift of money to the Sultan if I wanted to be allowed to do research in the sultanate. I had never done this and yet had never had any problem doing research here. This time, however, coming back after defending my PhD, I gave the Sultan an envelope with some money in it, telling him that it was to help him organise the festival. The Sultan looked overwhelmed, and told me how hard it was for him to cover the costs of such an event. All the singers and griots had to receive thousands of francs for their performances; hunters and warriors who ambushed or killed highway robbers were given even more; dozens of female servants were given brand new dresses; and hundreds of prestigious guests were invited to a costly evening meal. All this cost a fortune, and the sultan told me that he could not manage without the help of the elite of Banyo who gave money for the event, as I had just done. He then told me an anecdote about what had happened the day before. A child had presented himself to him with a chicken and an old
man’s stick. He gave the chicken to the Sultan and asked him if he remembered who was the owner of the stick. The Sultan said that, of course, he remembered the old man who owned the stick, and he gave him a gandoura (expensive cloth) as a token of his remembrance. This was the type of duty that he had to face almost every day, and it was a big responsibility for him. Then, to show his appreciation of my gesture, he gave specific instructions to one of his dignitaries that I should not miss any event happening within the palace, and that I should sit just behind him during the fantasia.

I visited the Sultan again several weeks later to talk about agro-pastoral conflicts in the region. Ethnic cleansing had started in neighbouring Nigeria, in the area which used to belong to his sultanate before the international boundary was drawn. Thousands of Fulbe had been chased away from the Mambila plateau and had crossed the border within a few days to seek refuge in Banyo. The Sultan suddenly began to complain bitterly about a letter of denunciation written to the prefect, accusing him of forcing refugees to pay a grazing tax or else be expelled out of his sultanate. He denied the charge, arguing that he did not force anyone, but that he could not refuse gifts that were voluntarily made by people, which were common and customary. He thus tried to gain my support in a case that made him very vulnerable vis-à-vis the administration (I later talked to refugees and saw evidence of letters written in Arabic and bearing his seal, which left no doubt regarding the veracity of the accusation).

Even Sultans or chiefs whose power might be seen as being based on hierarchical obligations or who might sell access to their resources contractually are heavily dependent on patronage and mutual obligations to maintain their power. As we saw in the third chapter, chiefs are supposed to be generous and to provide their people with goods and abundance. But as chiefs are not allowed to work, they must receive in order to give. People work for their chiefs, giving them food, livestock, wives and gifts (when asking or thanking for a service), and the chiefs are then under constant pressure to redistribute these goods generously to satisfy their people and retain their support. A Sultan’s generosity is directed first to the people who run his palace (his dignitaries, guards, griots, and servants), then to village chiefs. People are given wives, clothes, weapons, horses, cattle or money according to their rank and influence (their own networks of patron and clients) and to the services they can give to the Sultan. In exchange, the griots praise the Sultan
each time he appears in public. Hunters or guards keep law and order within the sultanate. They protect the Sultan and form a private police force to carry out his orders if anyone resists his authority. Elders can influence the votes and support of their clan members. Village chiefs and dignitaries help maintain law and order in the region, relay any of the Sultan’s instruction to the villagers, and collect the presents that are given to him.

But a patron must not only help those who are hierarchically below him; he must also make sure that he can draw on the support of other influential patrons. It is as important to keep on good terms with people below as it is with people above or those on the same level of influence as oneself. The more one can call upon others for help, the easier it is to help them too and to win new clients. Rich men, the educated elite, politicians, (sub-)prefects and, if to a lesser extent, foreign researchers, are all potentially important to chiefs or Sultans. Of course, welcoming officials is one of their moral duties, a heavy and expensive one, which often requires the aid of clients or villagers. But hosting an important man is more than a moral duty; it is also a strategy to make him a client by receiving him so well that he will feel indebted and be expected to reciprocate in the future. Chiefs and Sultans also use their influence and networks to ease the work of rich businessmen or important officials, thus reinforcing their influence and helping them fulfil their ambitions. Influential people can always count on an audience with a chief or Sultan when they want to expose their problems, exchange ideas or suggest political action, and this is reciprocated when chiefs needs their help. On public occasions, the Sultan and these influential people stay close to one another and invite each other as guests of honour, thus conferring legitimacy on each other and showing that they can talk to one another on the same level.

Although chiefs and Sultans do sell access to agricultural or grazing resources contractually, just as civil servants sell access to the resource they control, a large proportion of the goods and services they receive and give do not call for direct contractual compensation, but instead create and maintain a mutual alliance that can be called upon at any time and that provides influence and security. Mutual exchange between patrons and clients is a means to an end rather than an end in itself, as is the case for contractual exchange.
Securing a continuous flow of goods and services to a large network of people is crucial if one wishes to maintain one’s authority, influence and protection. This is true for all levels of power relations, which is why Bayart talks of “rhizome states” in Africa (based on a complex web of different networks), rather than of states based on “root” or “trunk” systems (Bayart 1993: 218-21).

Thus, patrons involved in networks of the redistribution of goods and services must be distinguished from civil servants relying on rents or prebends (see Lemarchand 1988) – something that authors like Chabal and Daloz (1999) fail to do when they argue that both politicians and civil servants can legitimately misuse public funds as long as it benefits their clients. Civil servants compete to acquire benefits from privatizing the resources of the state, are not elected and are not accountable to the local population, but only to their own superior or to one contractual client at a time. Politicians and patrons, on the other hand, derive their legitimacy from elections, from redistributing resources (whether out of their own pockets or from the State, such as through development projects), and from the protection they give their clients. Their capital is measured not so much in terms of how much money they have or which resource they control, but rather on how many people they can count on – how many people owe them. This capital, which relies on mutual social debt, would be lost if they engaged only in direct contractual exchanges or used hierarchical obligations to take without giving back. The mutual obligations that link patrons to their clients make them more immune to rapid political changes than civil servants, who rely on contractual or hierarchical obligations. Of course, civil servants might take part in patron-client networks like anybody else, but they do not depend on their network to retain their position, unlike patrons and politicians. For civil servants the exchange of goods and services is an end in itself, while for local politicians it is only a means to an end. Patrons may at the same time be civil servants, but they nevertheless play on two different registers. A Sultan or a maire might contractually sell access to the resource that he controls, but he changes strategies and gives his service for free when he seeks to gain the mutual support of a client or the protection of a patron. The contractual selling of public
goods and services must therefore be distinguished from the mutual obligations of clientelism.

**Local development**

The many failures of development projects have given rise to much speculation. If everybody agrees on the need to invest in local development, there is disagreement over how to achieve development and over the role of local participation or collective work as compared to private business. In what follows, I will argue that a better understanding of the different types of obligation between local actors in development can help us understand some of the conflicts that impede development projects.

*Traditional collective work and state development*

Collective work is organized in different ways, depending on the activity. When it comes to working for the chief, in his fields or repairing his palace, this is a hierarchical obligation and everybody participates – especially when the chief prepares beer and food to encourage them. The status of the chief and his well-being are supposed to reflect the organisation and personality of villagers. People feel ashamed if their chief lives in rags and shanties, as it reflects poorly on themselves as a population. Improving the chief’s condition is seen as improving everyone’s condition, and working on the chief’s palace is often the major development project of a village. This is difficult to understand for Western donors, who refuse to fund such projects, despite their self-proclaimed “participatory” approaches to development.93 Helping a dignitary to organise a large-scale ritual with beer and food is a hierarchical obligation within the patrilineage of the deceased, a moral obligation within the matrilineage of the deceased, and a mutual obligation within the matrilineage of the in-laws and for the *car* and *ndiŋndi*, since their par-

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93 Working on a church or mosque is also a top priority in many villages, for the same reason as the chief’s palace, and is just as unlikely to be taken up by Western development projects.
participation will be reciprocated in the future. Participating in the organisation of harvest festivals is a moral obligation, based on the principle of giving wide-ranging hospitality towards any outsider. There are also a number of tasks that people do collectively once a year, such as repairing a bridge or clearing the weeds on the paths leading to their fields. Such work is always initiated by the chief, who decides the date for it.

The usual development projects, such as providing a school, a road or a water pump, used to be undertaken by the state without much local participation. Local politicians never failed to present themselves as the ones responsible for bringing development projects to the locality, and their action was tacitly inscribed within a contractual obligation of recipients to re-elect their representative and to support the government and ruling party.

But state development can also be much more authoritative when it is directed by unelected civil servants relaying instructions from above and imposing them on villagers. When a national campaign on hygiene is started, for example, the (unelected) sub-prefect tours the villages in his administrative area and orders that all households should be whitewashed and equipped with pit latrines within 72 hours, otherwise their owners will be summoned to the gendarmerie in town. Villagers then rush to the hills to collect kaolin and splash it on to their mud huts. Those who do not yet have a pit latrine begin to dig holes behind their house, only to abandon them 72 hours later, once it becomes clear that the sub-prefect is not coming back to enforce his threat. Thus, when it comes to development campaigns, politicians usually rely on contractual or mutual obligations in order to reinforce their position of patrons, while civil servants rely on hierarchical obligations, as they are accountable to their own superiors rather than to the local population.

New forms of “participatory” development

In 2000-2001, my research in Cameroon was financed by the Danish Cooperation with the aim of studying the local committees for development that have mushroomed in the past decade. I therefore took a strong interest in development initiatives in the Kwanja region. One of them seemed promising. Although there was already a private Protestant
school in Yimbéré, villagers wanted to build a public school with the help of a project of the European Union: parents collect sand, stone, gravel, carpentry, labour and money to cover one third of the cost of the school, and the EU does the rest. The village had already built a mud hut with a straw roof to be used as classroom and had been assigned one headmaster paid by the state to teach more than eighty pupils. Parents paid a limited school fee to hire another teacher from among the villagers. Still, school fees were lower than in the Protestant School, which did not receive enough in subsidies from the state and had to ask for higher school fees. Yet, despite the apparent willingness to build a school, things were at a standstill. The headmaster approached me and asked for my help.

At first it looked very simple. Since everybody wanted to work, things just needed to be organised in a meeting so that the work could start. The greatest difficulty, however, was in organising the first meeting. The chief promised several times to organise one, but never summoned it. It took careful backstage diplomacy to bypass the chief with his own agreement and organise the meeting “in his name”. After the usual problems in deciding how much money each individual should pay, how much time he or she should work, and how to deal with childless people or those with all their children in the Protestant school, the first working day was programmed, which demonstrated an amazing level of mobilisation. In the next two weeks, however, participation plummeted. Meanwhile, collecting the money had started, which proved extremely slow and difficult. Another meeting was called, after much diplomatic discussion with the chief. Mobilisation slightly improved. It was even remarkably good on the day a member of the elite bought maize beer to motivate those who were participating in the collective work. But it was only after one villager got the idea to beat the war rhythm on his drum early in the morning that people responded in numbers again. Things also improved after the EU project hired an NGO to address the problems of mobilisation found in the region.

A customs officer who had recently retired and come back to the village was one of the few Kwanja of his generation who had “gone far”. He knew the value of education, and became personally very committed to the school project, trying to motivate people to collect money, and threatening those who refused. However, since he was the brother of the village chief, soon enough rumours were started accusing him of wanting to kill his brother in order to replace him. The two brothers stopped talking to one another and the custom officer stopped working for the school project, which came to a standstill, until the Tikar headmaster and myself started it again after a renewed diplomatic ballet. I became more personally involved and started acting as a patron, giving small amounts of money to motivate key individuals who could oil the machinery of the project (chief, drum-beater, headmaster, etc.) I left Cameroon with little hope that the project would survive local conflicts, but
was positively surprised a few years later to see that the four classrooms had been completed and that the state had sent a second teacher.

With the drying up of state development funds, villagers have had to rely increasingly upon themselves to build and maintain schools, health centres, water pumps or roads. This brings specific problems. First, free access to education, health, water and road infrastructure used to be a moral obligation of the state (even when the creation of a new infrastructure was presented in contractual terms). Today, while such services are increasingly privatised, people are reluctant to pay to access contractually a service that cannot be refused morally. This creates huge problems for those managing these services. Health centres cannot morally refuse to treat a patient who has no money and promises to pay later. But as a contractual obligation comes second to a moral one, clinics in the Kwanja region have a long list of patients with overdue payments. Likewise, water pumps have committees collecting a small amount of money monthly from users to buy spare parts when something breaks. Yet, despite the small amount of money involved, some users refuse to pay it. Problems are as likely to come from men as they are from women, the primary users of water pumps: there are cases of women who receive 100 CFA every month from their husbands to pay for the water, but who prefer to use this money for other things. Free access to water is a moral obligation, and the contractual obligation to contribute to pump maintenance is second to it. Giving water is indeed one of the cornerstones of customary hospitality, and those who refuse to give water to someone run the risk of being bewitched and of dying with a big belly filled with water, which is partly why the people in charge of maintaining the pump do not dare to be too strict in refusing access to or punishing those who do not pay. Likewise, even though a public primary school is supposed to be free, the parents’ association must often collect money to house the teacher sent by the government, hire a local teacher to help him hold big classes, and maintain the buildings. Each year, the parents’ association debates hotly what to do with parents who fail to pay the 2500 CFA (4 Euros) to educate their children when the state forbids schools to expel children and proclaims that primary education is free.
The difficulty of dealing with free-riders is characteristic of the management of common goods. If a few people obtain a benefit without bearing the cost of a service, those who follow the contractual obligation will be tempted to imitate the free-riders. Either everybody pays and participates, or nobody does. When everybody agrees to participate in a collective project such as building a school, participation is truly amazing. Even young children insist on doing something and carry sand or stones in small cooking pots instead of buckets. The elderly, who are too old to carry anything, sit down with a hammer to break stones and produce gravel. Everybody feels morally and mutually obliged to work because everybody else does. But it is very difficult to get everybody to participate in a project. There are always some who claim to have no use for a school or a pump since they have no children at school or already have a well in their backyard. The people in charge of a project generally argue that it benefits the well-being and good reputation of the whole village, not just of those using the service. The chief might, moreover, use his authority to threaten those who are reluctant to participate like others, but such threats appear unconvincing when they relate to a service that is otherwise characterised by moral obligations.

There are, like anywhere else, many personal conflicts within Kwanja communities, and the people who have a conflict with or are in competition with those who are in charge of a project are reluctant to participate. When confronted with free-riders, many Kwanja tend to join the free-riders rather than put pressure on them to participate, which precipitates the failure of the project.\footnote{The Kwanja development association faces a similar problem with its micro-credit scheme. Some years ago, a few individuals failed to reimburse their loans. The leaders threatened repeatedly to pursue people with overdue payments, but seldom dared to bring them to the police. Every year, more and more people fail to repay their loans, some asking openly why they should do so when others do not.} Maintaining peace with relatives and neighbours is more important than scolding them for the common good. They expect the chief to take on the thankless task of pursuing those who sabotage the collective effort, but chiefs face the same difficulties, as it is difficult to use hierarchical authority to implement a task that is not clearly defined as a moral obligation, and also difficult to threaten friends and rela-
tives. This gives excessive power to a few individuals, who do not hesitate to take their revenge in personal conflicts by withholding their participation and sabotaging their competitors’ efforts. As a result, it is not uncommon to see broken water pumps that have been left unrepaired because a few people refuse to pay their share, thus discouraging others from doing so, and because no leader dares to do what is needed to solve the problem. People then walk further to use another pump or use wells and rivers.

One of the current mantras of participatory approaches to development is to say that the more local people pay for a project, the more they will care for the results and maintain it. My experience indicates that maintenance problems are totally independent of the amount of labour and money that people invest. The problems pertain rather to perceptions of the legitimate type of obligation that surrounds the project, the strategies used to control free-riding and the quality of leadership. The contractual approach of so-called “participatory projects”, asking for a local contribution to cover a quarter to half the total cost, is no guarantee that a project will be successful, especially if part of the local contribution must be financial and if it amounts to more than what the local community would spend without any outside help. And insisting on a local contribution is no guarantee that the project will be maintained. This approach to development disregards the social and political aspects that make a project successful and uses the participatory approach to place the responsibility for any failure on local communities (“the project failed because the population failed to participate”).

Leadership

Implementing complex development activities requires strong and organised leadership, but only a few people dare to assume such a

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95 Kwanja communities and the Kwanja development association have built tin-roofed and cement local schools for a fraction of what an EU project asked them (one third of a total cost of 4.5 millions CFA for a school). Although there is no comparison in the quality of the two types of schools, the difference was big enough to make many Kwanja argue that they would prefer to build their own schools by themselves.
responsibility. Chiefs can do it, and everybody expects them to do so, but many Kwanja chiefs are unwilling to engage in projects that require threatening the recalcitrant and are likely to bring accusations of embezzlement. Local politicians or patrons might take the lead and use their clientele to make a project succeed, often taking money from their own pocket and deriving credibility and a reputation for good leadership in case of success. But many are reluctant to invest too much money or to risk their reputations if the project fails. Or else they are reluctant to assume the responsibility for maintaining the infrastructure. A few people among the locally educated elite might dare to replace the chiefs and politicians and take the lead, but they are likely either to be accused by the chiefs of threatening their authority or to be suspected by the population of having a personal stake in the project and deriving a private benefit from it. This will inevitably trigger defection among some villagers according to the logic that either everybody participates and benefits on an equal footing or nobody does. Things can be easier for foreign elites (headmasters, traders, missionaries, anthropologists), who are richer than the local average and disinterested in acquiring a title in local or customary politics, which protects them from the suspicion of deriving a personal benefit from it. Moreover, having no relatives locally protects them to some extent from fears of witchcraft, from the pressures of mutual obligations and from having too many afterthoughts when dealing with people who are trying to sabotage the project.

As we have seen, there is a strong ideal that either everybody participates equally in collective project, or nobody does. Executive committee members are in breach of this rule since they work and contribute much more than others. They are therefore widely suspected of deriving private advantages from it. It is as if the general privatization of the public good and the contractualization of access to it had spread to any type of public good, down to the smallest collective projects. Executive committees (presidents, vice-presidents, secretaries, treasurers) are widely expected to behave like civil servants and to treat the committee’s resources as their private property, allowing access to it contractually, or else taking money from the project at will. It is clear that this is the case for many committees that manage funds, including those in which
one would expect moral obligations to come first, such as church executive committees. The expectation also exists in relation to executive committees that do not have many funds to manage or in those where the funds are well-managed and nothing is taken out of the project. I was regularly approached by members of the executive committees of development associations, anti-AIDS campaigns, Kwanja literacy campaigns, the church, schools’ parents’ associations, and water pumps, complaining about dedicating their time for nothing, and asking me whether I could give them some money to “motivate” them.

But such expectations of contractual obligations also have the effect of discouraging people who consider their involvement a moral obligation – often people with a better education who wish to serve and help their nation or their own community. When such people become suspected of embezzlement or an abuse of power for their own private benefit, they prefer to quit their functions, saying that “I did not want to take on this task; it was the people who chose me. If some people believe that I derive a personal benefit from it, I prefer to quit”. These assertions parallel the discourse of the chief, who repeatedly says, “I never wished to become chief and I was chosen to do so, so why aren’t people obeying me? If it is like that, I prefer not to be chief anymore”. This usually prompts the villagers to comfort the chief and promise to be more obedient in the future, since chiefs are not allowed to abdicate and must hold on to their position until they die. But committee members may quit their positions, and it can be a challenge to keep people of high moral dedication, as they become discouraged by accusations of embezzlement.

The way committee members are chosen tells us much about the way their job is perceived. On the one hand, people with a higher education, experience of urban life and of moral dedication or local political ambition are found sitting on many committees. On the other hand, one also finds people who have more or less been compelled to take on the position against their will, since there exists a mutual obligation to share the burden of development. When a new committee is created, attempts are made to find those who still hold no position anywhere, their candidacy is then proposed (often against their will), and they are elected by acclamation, regardless of their qualification or motivation. They must accept
such positions out of a mutual obligation to take their turn in holding collective responsibilities. Such mutual obligations partly explain why one creates a new committee for each new task, instead of using existing ones. As a result, one finds in Kwanja communities a multitude of committees of all kinds run by a mixture of unmotivated people who have been forced to serve against their will and a handful of elites found in all the committees.

**Legitimacy and corruption**

As we have seen, the economy of exchanges is not just determined by profit, but is also social and moral in nature. Moral economy is embedded in different types of rule that apply differently according to the type of good and the persons who engage in the interaction. We have discussed in this chapter four different types of obligation (contractual, mutual, moral, hierarchical) with very different pragmatic implications for those who try to escape their implications. These obligations are found at all levels of social interactions, from interactions between children, spouses or relatives, to interactions between ethnic groups or states. They can account for most Kwanja socio-economic strategies, including those that appear most foreign to a Western observer, because they are ruled by a different logic (or ethics) than the latter expected to find. Such obligations need to be thoroughly understood by foreign development workers if they want to escape ethnocentric judgments and avoid repeating past mistakes.

Of course, such rules exist only as long as there is a consensus surrounding them. And this consensus is never given but always has to be renegotiated. The co-existence, overlap and competition of these four simple rules, at many different levels of social interaction, create constant negotiations about which ethical bases should apply to the interaction. Someone might call upon a moral obligation and shame to obtain free water from the pump, free medicines from the hospital, or a “free loan” (gift) from a relative. The interlocutor might call upon a contractual obligation to sell the water and medicine or use coercion so as to be reimbursed later. In my interactions with the Cameroonian administration, I was usually able to
call upon moral, legal or hierarchical obligations and sanctions (threatening to make use of my supposed connections) to obtain free access to administrative services where my Kwanja friends would probably have had to buy them contractually. But then the civil servants who agreed to give me their services for free appealed either to a moral obligation on my part to offer them something to drink and quench their thirst, or on mutual obligations to reciprocate with another service when in the future they needed my help.

Despite the possibility to negotiate, there is a widespread consensus about what type of obligation should apply to the exchange of which service between specific actors. Among the Kwanja, interactions between relatives are ruled by hierarchical or mutual obligations. Relations with politicians are based on mutual obligations, those with civil servants on contractual or hierarchical obligations. Hospitality and commonality rests on moral obligations. The market for grain or manufactured products is ruled by contractual obligations, etc. When anyone goes against this consensus, his or her behaviour is likely to be perceived as a corruption of the consensual rule. One can then talk of corruption or corrupt behaviour when a rule that was commonly accepted becomes challenged. When the state fails to pay salaries, it is corrupt. When civil servants begin to sell the services that they used to provide free of charge, they are corrupt. When one begins to sell access to water, it is a corruption of the moral obligation to provide it free of charge. Corruption characterizes either a change in the perception of past practices (Leys 1965: 41) or a transformation of social relations that is perceived as illegitimate (Sampson 1983: 88). Corruption therefore depends on the type of obligation to which it applies, the corruption of a moral obligation being different from that of a contractual one.

The “corruption” of an old rule might become so widespread, on a variety of levels of interaction, that it becomes a consensual rule in itself. The legitimacy of the new system depends on its capacity to create a consensus around the new type of obligation that regulates the exchange of certain types of goods or services between certain types of actor. If this analysis is correct, then the perception of corruption within the administration does not depend on whether civil servants redistribute their “income” into larger net-
works (as argued by Chabal and Daloz 1999: 15), but rather on whether the obligation that regulates a certain type of exchange between certain types of actors is legitimate and the object of a wide consensus. In such cases, it is the challenge of the new rule and the call to return to the original rule that might be perceived as corruption. For example, the privatization of the public administration (that was originally perceived as the corruption of a system ruled by legal and moral obligations) has been so far-ranging that contractual access to administrative services has become the object of a new consensus (people tend to complain about the lack of means to buy services, rather than complaining about having to pay for services). The call to re-moralize or re-legalize the administration and civil servants is strongly resisted (including by many clients), to the point that the fresh and clean civil servants who want to provide services on a moral or legal basis find that they are ostracized not only by their colleagues, but also by clients who can no longer buy any service they like and who might perceive such behaviour as corrupting the new system based on contractual negotiations.

Going back to the old system of values will require a change on a variety of levels. It will require more than calling for a re-moralization of administration (especially when this contradicts the call for contractual and privatized access to its services), and more than cosmetic changes at the top of the administration, as advocated by the common and recurrent “anti-corruption campaigns”. A structure that is disturbed at one level only is likely to show some resilience. Changing the structure might require a social revolution aimed at transforming the structures and values of the society from top to bottom (as was the aim of the aborted insurrection of 1992 in Cameroon, for example). The “clientelist state” has arguably been transcended in Cameroon under Ahidjo, but this was only possible because of a strong presidency capable of imposing new rules at all levels of the political structure (Bayart 1985: 141-82).

But when an old corrupt system becomes the norm and the new legitimate system, it might itself become corrupt. If the contractualization and privatization of administrative services become generally accepted today, the tendency towards increased hierarchical obligations that allow people to use their positions in a hierarchy and the power that ensue to extort money, without providing any
service in exchange, is strongly disapproved of and resisted. These actors (typically working for the police or the justice department) differ from patrons, chiefs and politicians in that they are not perceived to work for the common good and are not accountable to the people. Moreover, they differ from other civil servants in that they do not provide any service contractually, except permitting one’s freedom of movement and avoiding jail. What characterizes them is not the privatization of public goods, but rather the privatization of the legitimate organs of state violence (Bayart et al. 1999: 25). Through this process, the state and its representatives are no longer simply “kleptocrats” (seen from a moral point of view) or businessmen (seen from a contractual point of view), but become felonsious and lose what was left of their social legitimacy, since they derive their power merely from violence (Bayart 1999; Bayart et al. 1999). The new “felons” are widely seen as troublemakers and as a major threat to peace, as has been discussed in Chapter 1.

**Conclusions**

The economic sphere is often constructed by non-anthropologists in terms of rational choice theory, monetary cost/benefit ratios, and supply and demand. What is usually forgotten in such constructions are the social and moral aspects (or benefits), which can be much more important than monetary profit in determining actors’ choices. As we have seen in this chapter, one cannot understand the exchange of services among the Kwanja without knowing about their kinship system, political organisation, and world-view in relation to constructions of misfortune.

But this knowledge is not sufficient to determine the behaviour of a particular individual in advance. In every transaction, each actor may choose to play according to a few concurrent rules that, when combined, create a multitude of unpredictable outcomes, although they are always somehow recognisable and sound familiar to those who are acquainted with the local society and context. These rules framing Kwanja interactions are not totally foreign to an outside observer, as they exist in most societies. What is special among the Kwanja is not the fact that moral, mutual or hierarchical
rules inform their behaviour, but rather the types of interactions in which these rules play a role, and the ways in which social interlocutors are perceived and defined. One must know what it means to be a member of a matrilineage, what type of authority a chief has, who is autochthonous and who a migrant, as well as know about the different types of rights and duties that are attached to these social categories, in order to understand how the exchange of services and the conflicts surrounding them are negotiated. Neglecting these aspects, as is too often the case in development work, leads people to design projects that run against the local way of organising social relations, which can then create more problems than they solve.

The best way to become acquainted with these obligations is to participate in people’s lives and to work together to solve common problems. It is through lending money and struggling to be reimbursed that I became aware of the rules constraining the circulation of money. My involvement in a local school project made me face a number of problems that were commonplace for my collaborators, but totally unexpected for me, and I had quickly to internalize and adapt to the types of rules and obligations described in this chapter. Being a Westerner with money, knowledge and connections, I became a special target for many people trying to obtain something from me. I was permanently solicited to engage in patron-client relationships, something that annoyed me in the beginning, but which I progressively learnt to use to my own advantage as well. I could not live in Cameroon without facing some forms of “corruption”, and I had to learn how to relate to them in a way that was satisfactory both to myself and to the gatekeeper who expected something from me, thus experiencing the high flexibility, shifting context and constant renegotiations that characterize such interactions. All these events allowed me to obtain insights into some of the mechanisms that organize Kwanja society. Of course, the description of such mechanisms in terms of the four types of obligations described here is my own construct and is not something that I was told to write by my Kwanja informants. I nevertheless believe that this way of simplifying complexity is helpful in understanding ways of acting that are so contrary to what a western observer would expect, although they result from mechanisms that are also present in Western societies.
Throughout this book, I have sometimes presented the Kwanja as a homogenous community (when describing their kinship system or moral economy), sometimes as a community whose homogeneity is elusive and dissolves into smaller groups (when describing chiefly history or rituals), or else as a group having many things in common with their neighbours (when talking about regional history or misfortune). In this chapter, I describe how Kwanja identity is defined and negotiated, not least in relation to Fulbe identity, and how it may fade away when people convert to Islam and engage in a process of Fulbe-ization. This will lead to a discussion of the concepts of tribe and ethnic group, including the argument that most collective identities tend to idealise themselves as tribes while, in practice, these collective identities can be defined as ethnic groups, since they correspond to the definition of this concept and are constructed in accordance with similar mechanisms. But I will also argue, once more, that the outcome of similar structures can differ widely. What matters is not so much whether a collective identity is ethnic or not, or close to or far from the ideal of the tribe, but rather what kind of ethnic identity it is. In other words, the question is not so much whether the Kwanja can be said to be an ethnic group at all, given that their homogeneity dissolves when the level of analysis shifts, but rather what kind of ethnic identity it is. I will present here a few criteria to characterise or differentiate Kwanja and Fulbe identity, before discussing how they impact on identity dynamics in Adamawa.
The concept of tribe: a question of content and level

There is still no consensus today on the definition of ethnic groups, although social scientists do seem to share the same image of what they are trying to define and to agree informally on what an ethnic group is (or, rather, what an ethnic group is not). To understand why, it is useful to recall the debate surrounding the definition of tribe and the subsequent turn to ethnicity. In the first half of the twentieth century, social scientists used to define the concept of “tribe” as an autonomous and endogamous group, a bounded entity with a chief, a specific language, religion and culture, and constituting (at least ideologically) a descent group. The boundaries of the different traits (political, religious, linguistic, territorial, etc.) were supposed to correspond to each other. The definition of the tribe was primordialist: tribal affiliation was seen as a given. People belonged to the tribe if they possessed the different cultural traits that were given at birth. The concept of the tribe is indeed the ideal that the Kwanja educated elite try to reach. They strive to make the Kwanja appear more homogenous than they are, encouraging the translation of the Bible “into the Kwanja language” (although there is, in reality, a conflict among the Kwanja regarding the dialect that was chosen), presenting masquerades as the true Kwanja ritual (although they have been imported from migrant groups and are not practised by all lineages), and trying to impose a paramount chief for all Kwanja (something that has been impossible to implement, since no Kwanja chief agrees to be under the authority of any other).

There are mainly two kinds of problem concerning the definition of the tribe. The first concerns the “nature” or “content” of cultural traits. On the one hand, the boundaries of some of these traits are sometimes difficult to establish. For example, there may be chains of dialects in which it is difficult to define a boundary between two languages (Hymes 1967). This might be said to apply to

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96 I will not discuss here the definition of the tribe as an evolutionary step corresponding to a certain degree of social and political organization (see Sahlins 1961 and Service 1962). For a critique of this approach, see Crone (1986), Dole (1967), Fried (1967: 12-17) and Godelier (1973: 10-19).
The concept of tribe

the Kwanja as well, as the different dialects look more like different languages (Connell 2001). On the other hand, the boundaries of the different “cultural traits” do not correspond to each other. The linguistic boundaries are coterminous neither with the political ones nor with the distribution of religion, race, or kinship (Fortes 1940: 239; Dole 1967: 84; Fried 1967; Godelier 1973: 9; Southall 1970: 46). As we saw in Chapter 3, the Kwanja are an aggregate of six or seven “autochthonous” and “migrant” groups, sharing three to five dialects and a great variety of rituals, and divided into close to thirty chiefdoms. Some migrant groups have kept their dialect but lost their rituals, others have adopted the dialect of the host community but brought with them masquerades that were sometimes borrowed by other groups, etc. There is therefore no fit between these characteristics, neither at the level of the Kwanja as a whole, nor below, at the level of the groups or lineages, making the tribe a poor concept with which to account for the cultural diversity of and dynamics of identity among the Kwanja.

The second major problem concerns the relevant “degree” or “level” in defining the tribe (Skinner 1967: 72). When there are several interwoven levels of tribes, which one should be considered the “real” one? The problem is especially clear for segmentary societies, in which each subgroup can be said to correspond to the definition of the tribe at a certain level (one political unit = one territory = one ancestor = one language = one group responsible in case of murder, etc.; see Dole 1967: 85-6; Evans-Pritchard 1940: 142-3; Naroll 1964: 283; Southall 1970: 37-40). In the Kwanja case, what is the relevant level for talking about homogenous units? The local populations of Adamawa (as opposed to the Fulbe)? The Kwanja? The groups of the Nyasunda, Nyandung, Bung, Twendi, Yeka, Weri, Ndek-Yi? The different patrilineages? Can we use the same concept for the Fulbe, a people close to 15 million strong spread among a number of West African countries, and the Kwanja, who number close to 10,000 and live in a small part of Adamawa?

The problems of content and of level were crucial for comparative anthropologists, who needed a universal definition capable of defining comparable units with clear boundaries, and who therefore spent much time discussing how to save the concept of the tribe (Naroll 1964; 1973).
From tribe to ethnicity…

The debate on the relevant content and level of the tribe ceased when a subjectivist (or interactionist) approach was developed suggesting that the cultural content of an ethnic group does not matter, since it can change through time, even though the group itself remains (Barth 1969; Mitchell 1956; Moerman 1965 and 1967; Wallerstein 1960). Fulbe identity, for example, shows an extraordinary resilience, despite major changes in its content (conversion to Islam, sedentarisation, the creation of empire within some groups, etc.). For this approach, what is important is to study the maintenance of the group’s boundaries, which are mainly defined in the negotiation between self-ascription and ascription by others. It is thus through interaction between self and other based on a “we–they” feeling that ethnic identity is defined.\(^97\) The subjectivist approach shifted the emphasis away from an objective definition of the group to a subjective definition of identity.

Another approach, called instrumentalist (or mobilizationist), argued that ethnic movements or conflicts are not so much based on essentialist differences, but based on the competition for political or economic resources (A. Cohen 1969; 1974; Despres 1975; Glazer and Moynihan 1975; Patterson 1975; Hechter 1986). Ethnicity then derives from the collective aspiration for a better future and builds on collective action to defend the group’s interest and win more rights, power, or economic advantages compared to other, competing groups. Without conflict, competition or advantages to be gained, there is no ethnicity. This approach has been used, for example, to account for the creation of new “tribes” out of the colonial encounter. As the colonial powers expected to find tribal structures and to be able to rule indirectly through them, existing local social structures were opportunistically transformed in or-

\(^97\) Self-ascriptions and the ascriptions of others do not necessarily correspond to each other. Groups defined by others are very often too large to be accepted by the people concerned, who use more precise definitions (Mitchell 1956: 28). For example, in Cameroon, the Fulbe define people living in mountains as “Kirdi”, although these people see themselves as “Mafâ”, “Mofû”, “Dowayo”, “Mundang”, etc. Self-ascription is generally considered the most important criterion to us in defining ethnicity.
der to fit in colonial expectations and tap the social, economic and political advantages deriving from doing so.\textsuperscript{98} This provides a good tool for understanding why the Kwanja elite refer so much to the Kwanja and try to make them appear more homogenous than they are. On the one hand, the elites are those who have most to gain from this process (in terms of both personal pride and self-esteem, but also in terms of being the spokesmen of a larger group and deriving greater influence from it). On the other hand, they are the ones who feel responsible for improving the lot of their relatives and allies. It is also clear than the Kwanja follow their elite only in so far as they see a common benefit in the path that the elite propose to them, as was the case for the development association of the Kwanja region.

Yet, none of these approaches, taken alone, can refer to all aspects of Kwanja identity. The primordialist approach cannot account for Fulbe-ization or explain why the grandchild of an Kwanja living in town still feels and calls himself “Kwanja”, even if he does not speak Kwanja anymore and does not know much about Kwanja culture and history. The subjectivist approach neglects the importance of objective diacritical markers in situational ethnicity (not everyone can pass for a Fulbe in all circumstances). Finally, the instrumentalist approach cannot explain why most Kwanja maintain their identity when it is economically or politically disadvantageous to do so, and when they would gain wealth and political influence from Fulbe-izing.

However, taken together, these three approaches complement one another and constitute a minimal definition of ethnicity as a collective identity based on at least one objective diacritical marker (“cultural trait”), subjectively negotiated through self-ascription and ascription by others (or a “we–they feeling”), and existing because people defining themselves along similar lines have an interest (private and/or collective) in doing so.\textsuperscript{99} This is the

\textsuperscript{98} See, for example, Amselle (1985 and 1990); Bazin (1985); Colson (1967); Dozon (1985); Harries (1989); Papstein (1989); Ranger (1989); Sharpe (1986); Skinner (1967 and 1975); Vail (1989); and Young (1985).

\textsuperscript{99} For a comparative discussion of the different approaches, see also Cohen (1978); Epstein (1978: 91-112); Jenkins (1986); Pouignon and Streiff-Fenart (1995); Royce (1982: 18-39).
definition on which I rely in this chapter to talk about “ethnic groups” and to argue that any collective identity can qualify as such.

... and back to tribe

As the new concept of ethnicity was much more fluid and flexible than the old concept of the tribe and could account better for cultural complexity (R. Cohen 1978), it replaced the concept of “tribe”, which disappeared from academic vocabulary, although it still survives in common speech. At the same time, the discussion about relevant content and level disappeared from academic debates while most academics were concentrating on discussing the subjective negotiation of we–they feelings and the instrumentalisation of identity to gain political and economic advantage. Yet, the issue of level and content resurfaced when discussing which type of collective identity was not ethnic. Instead of considering any collective identity as ethnic if it had some objective diacritical marker negotiated subjectively through a we–they feeling, and constituting the basis of a personal and collective interest, most scholars restricted “ethnicity” to what came closest to the former concept of the tribe, rejecting as “non-ethnic” what did not fit this concept. I shall illustrate this with some examples.

Religious groups have objective diacritical markers (beliefs, practices, food habits, dress codes, specific laws and punishments, etc.), strong we–they feelings, and strong economic and political interests as groups. They should therefore be considered “ethnic”, since they fit well with the definition of this concept. Some argue, however, that followers of a world religion cannot constitute an ethnic group because the religious group cuts across different nations, thus implying that ethnic groups must, like tribes, exist below the level of the nation (De Vos 1982: 13-15). But even within nations, religious groups are often disqualified as ethnic groups when they cut across other groups that are considered to be the “true” ethnic groups (Enloe 1973: 17). In this sense, Muslims do not constitute an “ethnic group” in Cameroon because they are found among the Fulbe, Kwanja and Mambila, which are regarded as the
only ethnic groups in the country (presumably on the basis of language or some other trait). If there is an overlap between two criteria, one of them must necessarily not be the basis of ethnic identity, since the old notion of the tribe says that one can belong to only one tribe – preferably the group which has the highest overlap between different diacritical markers. Others use primordial arguments to claim that religious identities are not ethnic because they do not involve “cultural groups” (Isajiw 1974), rejecting as “non-ethnic” what can be acquired. Finally, the mobilisationist approach recognises as “ethnic” only those religious groups that are engaged in a political conflict, such as the Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland (Glazer and Moynihan 1975), thus disregarding past or latent conflicts between competing religious groups to gain followers, political influence, subsidies, freedom of practice, etc.

Descent groups can also qualify as ethnic groups, since they have a clear diacritical marker (descent, often combined with taboos, exogamous rules, economic and political solidarity, etc.) and strong we–they feelings, and they constitute an economic or political unit that defends its own interests. Horowitz declares, for example, that “there is no bright line between ethnic group and kinship. Ethnicity and kinship overlap: ethnicity builds on kinship, both are confused with the other” (Horowitz 1985: 61). Among the Kwanja, for example, the divide between kinship and larger communities is not clear, as some patrilineages can be said to be groups in themselves, while other patrilineages build political and ritual alliances by creating metaphorical kinship links. However, the same Horowitz talks later on about “sub-ethnic” and “supra-ethnic” levels (ibid.: 19, 68), as if there was, after all, a clear divide between ethnicity and kinship, and as if it was possible to isolate a specific “ethnic level” in the continuum. Van den Berghe (1978: 404) suggests that the difference between kin groups and ethnic groups is that the former are exogamous, while the later are generally endogamous. We find here the cliché that the ethnic group (like the tribe) should be isolated, autonomous and self-sufficient, at least concerning matrimonial alliances. R. Cohen (1978: 387-88, 400) rejects kin groups as ethnic groups because they cut across other groups that he considers to be the true and only “ethnic groups” of a region, thus implying that one can be the member of only one ethnic group, and
that the different criteria used in defining an ethnic group should correspond to one another, as in the old concept of tribe.

Gender groups can easily be seen as ethnic groups. They have a fundamental diacritical marker (sex, often coupled with different activities, dress codes, access to education or economic and political power, etc.), a strong we–they feeling, and a common interest as a group. Among the Kwanja, women have their own chiefs, secret rituals, food taboos, fields, granaries, economy, kitchens, and ritual and household duties, which parallel and complement those of men but nevertheless remain separate. They act as a group and strongly reject men daring to interfere in their business or rituals. They are able to mobilize to defend their rights and ask for a better balance of work or the power of the different gender groups.100 Women reproduce matrilineal kin groups that differ from the patrilineal ones reproduced by men. So why are gender groups never recognized as ethnic? Because they do not correspond to the image of the tribe. When Keyes (1976: 205) says that “sex cannot distinguish groups of people”, or when Brass (1991: 19) argues that communities based on gender are not ethnic groups because they cannot reproduce themselves, they do not mean that men and women cannot be distinguished or that they cannot reproduce. They probably mean that gender distinctions do not fit with other distinctions, such as language, religion and politics, which are closer to the old ideal of the tribe and that they cannot reproduce alone, without the other gender group, as if ethnic groups were, like tribes, isolated, autonomous, endogamous and self-sufficient. Eriksen (1994: 115) argues that an “ethnic group” (understand: “tribe”) can be exterminated without any problem for the others, which is not true for a gender group. This might be true at the global level, but it disregards the fact that most collective identities based on gender groups exist at a local level, and one does find historical examples of gender groups being exterminated at that level.101

100 For a description of a women’s political uprising in the region, see Ritzenhaler (1960).
101 In Cameroon, as in many other parts of Africa, for example, slave-traders were more interested in women than in men, as women were in greater demand, not only as a work force, but also for sexual services, their reproductive purposes, and their docility (Klein 1983; Law 1995; McDougall 1995; Robertson and Klein
The fact that many social scientists try painstakingly to disqualify religion, kinship, gender or social class as “non-ethnic” suggests that such groups do in fact fit the definition of the ethnic group well, but not with the old ideal of the tribe. The core of the problem is the discrepancy between a flexible definition (the ethnic group) and an ideal mental image, or folk concept (the tribe). On the one hand, scholars reject the notion of tribe on the grounds that it is never found in a complex reality and that this concept is too rigid; they then develop the concept of ethnic group using a flexible definition. On the other hand, they refuse to consider as ethnic anything that corresponds to this new definition, and they only accept as ethnic what fits the very folk concept of the tribe they want to get rid of.

Social classes, when they have class consciousness, should qualify as ethnic groups since they are based on objective differences that feed a we–they feeling and a class struggle to maintain or win advantages. And yet many scholars argue that social classes cannot be ethnic groups. First, they cut across national boundaries (De Vos 1982: 20). Secondly, even within national boundaries, social classes cut across the groups that are arbitrarily defined as ethnic and that correspond to the old notion of the tribe (Royce 1982: 225; McKay 1982: 400; Olzak 1982: 254). Here the notions of vertical and horizontal solidarities are invoked to argue that class consciousness must cut across other types of collective identity, but that conversely, ethnic groups must contain different social classes. The only social classes that are sometimes recognized as “ethnic” are those that are superimposed on what were earlier defined as ethnic groups, such as the Hutu and Tutsi, for example (Brass 1985: 15; Horowitz 1985: 22; van den Berghe 1983: 231). Other scholars, adopting a primordialist point of view, dismiss social classes as “non-ethnic” on the grounds that they are not “cultural” groups given at birth (Isajiw 1974: 120; Isaacs 1975). Several authors (Enloe 1973: 39; Roosens 1989: 17; Glazer & Moynihan 1975: 19) claim that attachment to an “ethnic group” (i.e. a “tribe”) is much more affective than attachment to a social class. Finally, some social scientists argue that social classes cannot be ethnic groups simply because the two concepts are defined differently, without stopping to consider that there might be cases in which one is encompassed by the other (van den Berghe 1975: 72; Eriksen 1994: 53).
All collective identities are ethnic

A recurring argument used to disqualify some collective identities as non-ethnic is that they cut across other identities that are regarded as ethnic (i.e. which come closest to the old image of the tribe). “Actors have multiple social attachments (e.g. class, religious, sexual, national, regional loyalties) which can coincide, contradict or overlap with ethnic ties” (McKay 1982: 400; see also Isajiw 1974: 120; Olzak 1982: 254; Roosens 1989: 16; Royce 1982: 225). Ethnicity is presented as existing independently from, and at the same level as, religion, race, class (or profession), kinship, political affiliation and territory, as if ethnicity built on anything but these criteria. But to say that an ethnic group can be not defined by means of production, by reference to a language, religion, gender, race, nor to descent is to empty ethnicity of all its substance. If we define ethnicity by what it is not, we are left with an empty concept, independent of any content. Yet, some content is always needed in ethnic interactions. One cannot just claim to be a member of a group; there are some “objective” constraints that are sometimes insurmountable (Okamura 1981: 454-6; Burgess 1978: 269). Instead of saying that an identity is either ethnic or religious, racial, territorial, and so on, we should rather say that ethnic identity builds on religious, racial, territorial and/or other criteria, coupled with a we–they feeling and a common collective interest. This implies that people can belong to several different ethnic groups at the same time, whose relevance depends on the context of the interaction, some being based primarily on religion, other on descent or on language, etc.

A second common argument used to deny the label of ethnicity to some collective identities is to say that an ethnic group cannot be based on only one diacritical marker alone, but must be based on several. “Ethnic groups ... share clusters of beliefs and values. One value held in common by a number of persons is insufficient to sustain an ethnic community” (Enloe 1973: 17, his emphasis). In other words, a group defined by the sole criterion of religion would have a religious identity, a group defined economically would be a social class, a group defined by a language would be a linguistic community, but a group defined by a combination of
All collective identities are ethnic. This fits well with the folk concept of the tribe defined as a collection of different criteria whose boundaries are coterminous. But it disregards the fact that the boundaries of the “cluster of beliefs and values” are seldom coterminous (see the above discussion on the content of the tribe). Moreover, it disregards the fact that most collective identities, even those primarily based on one dominant criterion, tend to superimpose other criteria on it in order to maximise differences with neighbours, a process that has also been referred to as “multi-symbol congruence” (Brass 1976: 227, 239; 1991: 21, 27, 63). A religious identity will tend to build difference on more than just doctrine or beliefs. In Cameroon, for example, Christians and Muslims are not just religious communities but often regarded as territorial communities, as the north is considered Muslim, while the south is seen as Christian. The two communities are considered to be “cultural” communities, with own specific dress codes (Gandourah for Muslims, Western clothes for Christians), food taboos, music, arts, and architecture. They are associated with different linguistic communities, and have different scriptures and school systems (Fulfulde, Arab and Koranic schools for the Muslims; French, the Latin alphabet and Western schools for the Christians). They tend to rely on different legal systems and political strategies to further their own interests (the sultans of northern Cameroon playing a central role for the Muslims). A linguistic community will also tend to maximise difference. In Cameroon, the Francophone and Anglophone regions not only define themselves on the basis of the two national languages, but also, and more importantly for their political struggle, on the basis of different colonial heritages. Such differences pertain, among other things, to schools, laws, food habits, literary traditions, attitudes towards traditional power and corruption, industry, and so on.

Thus, any collective identity, even those primarily based on one single diacritical marker, always try to maximize commonality within the “we-group” and difference from the “they-group” by maximizing the number and significance of diacritical markers used in the comparison. In other words, any collective identity tries to objectify subjective differences in order to come closer to the ideal of the tribe and to create (at least the illusion of) congruence be-
between the borders of different diacritical markers. Yet, this mechanism will never succeed fully as the reality will always be much more complex and dynamic than the ideal. As we can see, the concept of the tribe should not be rejected as something which does not exist in reality because it does exist as an ideal in the minds of local actors (as well as in the minds of anthropologists). This folk concept explains the dynamics of multi-symbol congruence, which strives to maximize selfing and othering by controlling the coterminous boundaries of clusters of diacritical markers, while always falling short of this ideal and having to deal with a complex reality. In the words of Banton (1979: 136):

“We should recognize that ethnicity is also a folk concept. Little is to be gained by sociologists arguing about what ethnicity ‘is’ when they are simply taking from the common speech of their own generation the assumption that some sort of groups or social relations are to be classified as ethnic”.

A last common problem when trying to adapt the old ideal of the tribe to the flexible definition of ethnicity is the misfit of level. Defining the level of ethnicity somewhere above kinship and below nationality prevents us from identifying the recurrent properties that characterize collective identities across scales of analysis. It entertains the illusion that what happens at a specific level of analysis differs fundamentally from what happens at other levels.

One way of solving these problems is to apply radically the definition of the ethnic group (as based on some diacritical marker, a we–they feeling and a common interest), which implies, in practice, recognizing that any collective identity can be seen as “ethnic”. Thus, instead of emptying ethnicity of any content and arbitrarily deciding which level characterizes ethnicity, it would be more productive to focus on recognizing that ethnicity must build on some (shifting) content, and analyse how this content is negotiated at a variety of levels. What matters is not so much whether a collective identity can be considered ethnic or not, but rather to discuss what type of ethnic identity it is, what are its intrinsic qualities, and how the identity is defined and negotiated with regard to identities based on other contents or levels.
In what follows, I will discuss a few aspects that distinguish different types of ethnicities, and describe what differences they make in the Kwanja region.

**Closeness to the idealized identity**

A man greets me and starts talking in a Kwanja dialect. I struggle to understand what he says, and cannot communicate with him. He shifts to French and complains that I still don’t speak the local dialect, despite having lived many months in the community, unlike Martin and Joan (who are translating the Bible into the Sundani dialect), who speak it very well and **have become true Kwanja**.

Another day, while watching a masquerade, a young man tells me proudly that it is the real and original tradition of this village. I answer that the masquerade does not originate from here but has been borrowed from a neighbouring village. The young man does not believe me and asks an old man standing next to us, who confirms what I just said. The young man then tells me: “You know the Kwanja culture and history better than myself; you have become a true Kwanja”.

What does it take to be “a true Kwanja”? As we have seen in the previous chapters, people who present themselves as Kwanja do so on the basis of ancestry (especially patrilineal), language, residence, the territorial origin of their patrilineage, political allegiance, participation in rituals, respect for patrilineal taboos, joking with allies, etc. Ideally, a Kwanja should have a “Kwanja” father and a “Kwanja” patrilineal ancestor. This goes hand in hand with claiming to come from a “Kwanja” trench of origin, following “Kwanja” patrilineal taboos, being under the authority of a “Kwanja” chief, and residing on and having access to “Kwanja” land controlled by the chief or patrilineage. Ideally, a “true Kwanja” should also have a “Kwanja” mother and a matrilineage composed of people recognised as “Kwanja”. This goes hand in hand with participating in solidarity networks with “Kwanja” people. A Kwanja should also speak a dialect recognised as “Kwanja” (Ndung or Sundani), joke with the allies of the “Kwanja”, participate in “Kwanja” rituals, and be born, raised, and live on a territory defined as “Kwanja”, if possible in the appropriate trench of origin.

Ideally, a Kwanja should have all these characteristics. In
practice, though, few people can claim them all.\textsuperscript{103} Nobody lives in the old trench of origin anymore; a minority lives on patrilineage territory; intermarriage, migration, and conversion to Islam or Christianity have blurred various boundaries, and half of all “Kwanja” belong to patrilineages that are said to originate from the “Tikar”, “Mambila” or “Bute”. Moreover, being able hypothetically to master all the relevant criteria is not in itself sufficient to be a Kwanja, as one can always choose to reject the Kwanja identity and claim another one (usually a Fulbe identity). I therefore write “Kwanja” in inverted commas to stress the fact that the criteria for defining “Kwanjaness” cannot be taken for granted but shift according to context.

People will generally claim to be Kwanja on the basis of a few criteria. Some people can claim a Kwanja identity just because their father or mother did so – even though this only shifts the burden of proof to the level of the parents. For example, the children of elites who migrated to town or of former slaves born in the palace, who do not speak any Kwanja dialect, do not participate in any Kwanja ritual, do not live or visit any Kwanja village and often do not even know their relatives, can still claim to be Kwanja, according to context. Migrants who are subject to a local chief can consider themselves as having become Kwanja, even though they do not always speak a Kwanja dialect or participate in local rituals.\textsuperscript{104} The missionaries who have analysed the Kwanja dialects, or the anthropologist who has studied history and rituals, can pass as Kwanja, and even as “better Kwanja” than others due to their specialised knowledge, even though they usually retain their independ-

\textsuperscript{103} Moreover, the boundaries of such criteria shift. One does not live on one’s patrilineal territory, but one can claim that an ancestor did. One is not born in the trench of origin, but one’s spirit will go back there after death. One lives in the Tikar plain but claims that it was conquered long ago and that it has become Kwanja. One comes from a Tikar patrilineage but can argue that it has now become Kwanja with time, etc.

\textsuperscript{104} Migrants who agree to become subject to a Kwanja chief and to help him in his projects, together with other villagers, can be seen as better integrated than some “original Kwanja” (members of the chief’s patrilineage), who may be reluctant to participate in collective work for the chief. On the other hand, migrants who reject the authority of the local chiefs are seen as a threat, regardless of whether they were born in the village or speak a local dialect.
ence vis-à-vis the authority of a chief, do not participate in any local ritual, and do not have any Kwanja ancestry.

One can present oneself as Kwanja through one’s father, as Mambila through one’s mother, as Tikar through one’s wife or husband, and as Fulbe because of conversion to Islam and residence in town. Or one can participate in a Kwanja ritual today, in a Mambila ritual tomorrow and go to church on Sunday. One hears people say things like “His father is Tikar, but he has become a Kwanja”; “his mother is Kwanja, and he is therefore half Kwanja”, “he refuses to speak Kwanja and does not visit us anymore; he is no longer Kwanja”. Thus, one can still claim to be Kwanja, even though one does not speak any Kwanja dialect, comes from patrilineage regarded as Mambila, Tikar or Bute, was not born and does not live on a Kwanja territory, or is not under the authority of a Kwanja chief, as long as one claims to be a member, as long as one has another criterion that one can play on, and as long as this criterion is significant in a given social interaction.

The question is not so much whether one is Kwanja or non-Kwanja, but rather whether one is more or less Kwanja, or a better or worse Kwanja, according to how many diacritical markers one masters and mobilizes in a given context, and thus according to how close one can come to the ideal identity: either the tribe as a full and perfect collection of coterminous diacritical markers, or a partial vision of the tribe with a special focus on a few diacritical markers that are especially significant for a given social interaction. The same can be said of any collective identity, including those primarily based on economy, gender, religion, kinship, etc.

Self-ascription and ascription by others

Because the same identity is claimed by different people on different grounds, there is a lack of fit between self-ascription and ascription by others. If I want to pass as a Kwanja, I must either claim this or be recognized as such by others, and preferably both. The stronger my claim and the more people recognize me as Kwanja, the more Kwanja I am likely to be. Others might challenge the identity I claim on the basis of what I lack according to the ideal or the
relevant marker in a given interaction (whom I marry, where I live, how I practise rituals, how I behave with “fellow Kwanja”, whether or not I participate in a collective enterprise, etc.). Thus, if self-ascription remains a key feature in the definition of identity (it is, for example, the only criterion used in surveys), it is mediated in the field by the ascriptions of others according to context. This is a general feature of collective identities.

Someone might define himself as a Fulbe on the basis of his conversion to Islam, his marriage to a Fulbe woman and his living in town in a Fulbe environment, while others might continue to see him as a Kwanja on the basis of his ancestry. Someone might declare himself to be a Muslim but have this identity contested because he drinks alcohol. People who define themselves as Christians on the basis of being baptised, reading the Bible, going to church, believing in the Christian dogma, and having faith and a personal relationship with God might be challenged by others if they are corrupt or accused of practising witchcraft. Someone may claim to be Cameroonian because he possesses an identity card, but be denied such identity by others on the grounds that he was born in a neighbouring country, or because he has bought his citizenship through bribes.

Successfully claiming membership in a collective identity requires personal mobilization to support the claim, and that others recognize the claim as valid. Someone who wishes to be recognised as a member of a group can be challenged by others to “prove” his or her membership, according to a collection of criteria. Such processes of negotiation may then encourage people to fulfil as many criteria as possible, as well as to invest in a conspicuous display of them. In Adamawa, for example, the conversion of people of local extraction to Islam is often challenged by the Fulbe, who associate Islam with their own identity. This encourages converts to Fulbe-ize as well, in order to make their religious claims stronger and to find more ready acceptance as good Muslims. Thus, there is little point in anthropologists trying to define the precise content and boundaries of an identity when it is the object of endless negotiations and renegotiations by those who claim it.
Openness and closeness

The outcome of negotiating one’s identity through self-ascription and ascription by others depends on whether an identity is open or closed, i.e. on whether it is open to integrating new members or tries to keep them out. Traditionally, Kwanja identity has been very open, welcoming migrants, intermarrying with them and integrating them into Kwanja society under condition that they accept the authority of the local chief. As a result, half the Kwanja population claim to belong to a patrilineage of Bute, Mambila or Tikar origin. Fulbe identity, on the contrary, has been open to integrating new female members through marrying local women, but quite closed to the integration of local men, who were prevented from converting to Islam, marrying Fulbe women or herding cattle, i.e. from becoming Fulbe.

Things started to change with independence and the first elections, when it was no longer possible to use force to suppress local people’s aspirations to a respected identity (i.e. to Fulbe-ize), and when it became necessary for Fulbe politicians to enlist the support of the local population to win elections. From being a closed religion reserved to the dominant group and legitimising exploitation or slavery, Islam was instrumentalised by Fulbe politicians as an open (missionary) religion in order to iron out old differences and recruit new political followers (Gausset 2003). This opened the door to a widespread process of Fulbe-ization, allowing thousands of people to pass more easily as Fulbe, especially in an urban setting, to the point that the majority of “urban Fulbe” are to-

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105 Such distinctions have been made to characterise different systems of slavery (Kopytoff and Miers 1977; Watson 1980). In closed systems, slaves are prevented from integrating into their master’s family. They can neither intermarry with their master, nor can they try to become emancipated through converting, study, or trading or herding cattle, as this would bring them closer to their master’s status. If they bear any child by their master, the children are considered slaves or, at best, half-caste. In open systems, on the contrary, slaves are progressively integrated into the family of their master. They intermarry with their master’s family, and are allowed to convert to his religion and to seek emancipation through personal achievement. In practice, no system is purely open or purely closed, and the distinction between them must therefore be seen as lying somewhere along a continuum.
day widely believed to be in fact local people who have “Fulbe-ized”. However, many Fulbe resist such political, religious and social openness and dismiss new converts as “not truly Fulbe” (on the basis of their ancestry, among other criteria). Thus, if some Fulbe (especially those close to power and depending on broad support to rule) advocate opening up Fulbe identity, other Fulbe continue to define it as a closed identity and to challenge the claims of those who adopt it.

**Equality and hierarchy**

Some identities define themselves as hierarchically superior to others, as is the case for the Fulbe (see the first chapter) or for Islam and Christianity. Others see themselves and their neighbours as being on an equal footing, as is the case for the Kwanja and the Mambila. Hierarchical identities can be either closed (the Fulbe or Islam before Cameroonian independence) or open (Christianity in Cameroon; Islam or Fulbe identity after independence). Likewise, equal identities can be either closed (gender groups) or open (Kwanja, Mambila, etc.). Open and hierarchical identities are likely to be the fastest to grow, as there are few barriers preventing passage between them, there is an advantage in claiming them instrumentally, and it is difficult to leave them once one has become a member.

Those belonging to an identity presented as superior tend to look down on others and to consider them as of less worth than themselves. This has an important impact on the negotiation of identities, as it can confer a certain appeal to the hierarchical identity (encouraging identity conversion to gain access to a superior status), although it can also create resentment among those who feel discriminated against. For example, one of the reasons explaining conversion to Islam is that it confers a higher and more respected religious identity associated with power, wealth and knowledge, wisdom and freedom. But the Kwanja who convert to Islam and Fulbe-ize for this reason tend, as a consequence, to look down on their Kwanja relatives and to avoid contact with them, preferring rather to stay in the company of Fulbe. Cutting family ties with a “lower” identity might be necessary in order to reinforce one’s...
claim to the “higher” identity (in this case, Islam) and to invite ascription by others. Keeping close ties with old friends and family might pave the way for one’s claim to one’s new identity being challenged. Fulbe might deny someone his claim to be Muslim on the basis that he lives among people who drink alcohol.

On the other hand, members who wish to leave an identity that is defined as superior are likely to be cast away from the group or to face incomprehension as they implicitly challenge the hierarchical definition of their former co-members. For example, although many new converts to Islam see their faith challenged on the grounds that they have a local identity and are not truly Fulbe (and therefore not truly Muslim), those who choose to quit Islam become apostates and are even more ostracized than when their faith was challenged. As we can see, the equal definition of Kwanja identity and the hierarchical definition of Fulbe identity are crucial aspects explaining the dynamics between them.

**All or nothing, both-and**

Some collective identities tend to define themselves in terms of strict either-or (gender, Islam, Christianity, some nationalities, etc.), while others are more flexible and allow for the coexistence of several identities. Closed identities tend to be framed in terms of either-or, which helps protect the boundaries and prevent identity passing. Open identities, conversely, can adopt both possibilities, with different outcomes. An open identity can allow “both-and” mechanisms to facilitate social and political integration. Or they can insist, on the contrary, on a strict “either-or” definition in order to require from new members that they drop all other previous identities before being recognised as a full member, which can slow down the integration of new members. One can then debate whether Islam is more exclusive than Christianity because it requires converts to abstain from participating in traditional rituals (which are often accompanied by the consumption of alcohol), or whether it is Christianity that is stricter than Islam because of its incompatibility with polygamy or divination, among other things (see Alpers 1972: 180; Banadzem 1996: 135; Harries 1954: 33;
Hierarchical identities also tend to be framed in terms of “either-or”, as it is more difficult to claim both an inferior and a superior identity when one is compelled to look down on one’s inferiors and avoid contact with them. For example, when a Kwanja Fulbe-izes, it is difficult for him to remain a Kwanja at the same time since Fulbe-izing normally implies ostracising or displaying contempt for others, including one’s group of origin, unless it is made in two very different and separate contexts, for example in an urban and a rural setting respectively. Above a certain threshold, this can trigger mass conversions, as the relatives of new converts might prefer to follow them, rather than be ostracised and lose all contact with them.

The claim of some identities to exclusiveness (either-or status) raises the question of compatibility with other types of identities. Should the state and religion be separated? Can one be Kwanja while being at the same time Christian or Muslim? For identities that define themselves as compatible with others, people have more freedom to play on their divided allegiances and diversity of origins. The difference is often a question of power struggles. Exclusive (either-or) identities are mainly found in situations of the centralisation of power, such as a state controlling access to citizenship and the distribution of identity cards, or a church controlling access to membership. But even in these cases there might be some flexibility, as some people can acquire dual citizenship or continue to participate in traditional rituals while being Christian. In any case, although identities strictly defined in terms of “either-or” seem to view membership in terms of “all or nothing”, and although people can be forced to choose sides in times of violent conflict, it always remains a question of closeness to the idealized identity (a question of being “more or less”, or being a “better or worse” member; see above), even though this can be negotiated differently for self-ascription and for ascription by others respectively.
Plural identities (situational content)

When people are not required to define their identity in terms of either-or, they can play on a variety of criteria to claim different identities according to the context. One should here distinguish the situational content of identities from their situational level. On the one hand, people can choose between identities situated at a similar level of interaction but based on different diacritical markers, and play on these criteria to present themselves as members of one of these identities according to the benefits derived from such a definition. On the other hand, people can also choose between different levels of identity defined by the same criteria, but nested in a hierarchy according to the interlocutor and the quality of interaction.

Starting with the first type of situationality relying on the content, it is very common to find people who shift identity according to the benefits they derive in different contexts. Many “Kwanja” try to pass as Fulbe in an urban environment by displaying the criteria of Fulbe identity (language, dress code, religion, etc.) in order to obtain access to a higher status, to credit or to social, commercial and political networks. A deputy of Banyo is Kwanja from his father or paternal grandfather, Tikar from his mother, and Mambila from his paternal grandmother and from having been raised in a Mambila environment, and uses all these ties to win votes. The Sultan is also a case in point, since he has Fulbe ancestry in the pure patrilineal line, but local ancestors for all other lines. He can then both claim to be Fulbe and be recognised as such by the Fulbe, or alternatively claim a local identity (Kwanja, Wawa, Bute, etc.) and be defined as such locally, and he plays cleverly on this possibility according to the side whose support he is currently seeking. This situational use of identities is instrumental, as people act so as to obtain access to the advantages linked to a certain identity (Nagata 1974; Patterson 1975). The situationality of collective identity is made possible by the fact that “[ethnic boundaries] are multiple and include overlapping sets of ascriptive loyalties that make for multiple identities” (R. Cohen 1978: 387). Most collective identities are based on a collection of criteria, and few people satisfy them all. As a result, many people stand at the crossroads between different identities, and the blurred boundaries make it easier for them both to ac-
cept newcomers and to claim a different identity according to the situation.

Those who are not already situated at such crossroads always have the ability to acquire new criteria – learn new languages, convert to another religion, change profession, dress code or residence, marry across boundaries, integrate into another group, etc. A Kwanja who wishes to pass as a Fulbe, for example, should preferably have some knowledge of Fulfulde or Islam, and should follow the local Muslim dress code. Practising cattle-herding and mastering the elements of the pulaku will also help him claim a Fulbe identity. The more criteria and the deeper their mastery, the more convincing he will be in his new role and the “better Fulbe” he will be. Even ancestry, which is usually considered as given, can sometimes be acquired. One can become integrated into a lineage through marriage or adoption, becoming part of one’s master’s or patron’s lineage, etc. One can also invent a new pedigree for oneself in an anonymous urban environment. Race remains a diacritical marker when defining the Fulbe identity, but it is a criterion which can also be used situationally due to the many intermarriages between Fulbe and members of local communities, which have blurred even more the already weak racial boundaries (Burnham 1972).

**Nested segmentary identities (situational level)**

The second type of situationality deals with the level of identity. When a collective identity is nested in a chain of segmentary identities, the relevant level of the identity will be determined by the position of the interlocutor (see Mitchell 1956; Moerman 1965; Barth 1969; R. Cohen 1978; Keyes 1979; Okamura 1981). Someone will define himself as a Kwanja in front of a Mambila, but as a Nyadung in front of a Nyasunda when meeting a fellow Kwanja, or as a Merka in front of a Ngisam when meeting a fellow Nyandung. The question is not, “Who are the Kwanja?” but rather when, how and why the identification “Kwanja” is preferred (cf. Moerman 1967: 160). The same is true of any nested identity, including religious ones. Methodists are distinguished from Lutherans, but are both
Protestant when compared to Catholics, and all are Christian when opposed to Muslims.

The definition of the relevant level also depends on what is at stake. Among the Kwanja, the matrilineal group relevant for social interaction may consist of just those members who live in the same village, or the whole matrilineage spread over different villages, or even the whole matrilineage plus all matrilineages allied in a njâni relationship, depending on whether one is talking of solidarity, exogamous marriages or witchcraft accusations. Patrilineal groups may be narrowly defined as close descendants when talking about the succession of a chief, or can include all village members when organising a ritual, or all members of the patrilineage when negotiating matrimonial alliances or defending the integrity of the patrilineage’s territory. One level above, when organising rituals, it includes members of associated patrilineages within the patriclan (ndîndî or cêr).

Finally, the level judged relevant for the definition of a nested identity depends on the quality of the interaction. In a positive or friendly interaction, interlocutors will try to maximize common points and will therefore move upwards through the segmentation to define the relevant level. When two Kwanja meet for the first time and engage in a friendly conversation, they start by asking each other which trench they come from and whose matrilineage they belong to. If there is some overlap (even remote, such as going through the patrilineage of a grandfather or the matrilineage of a grandmother, or their njâni, ndîndî and in-law), they can already start using kinship terms to categorize each other, and they will proceed further to see if they can identify a closer tie. They will not only resort to kinship criteria but also to names (for homonyms), dates of birth (for those born within the same week), place of birth or religion (“brother in Christ or in Islam”) to reinforce any kinship bond they might find between them. Any difference they find might also be bridged by creating a new commonality in mocking people who belong to neither group (Despres 1975: 106-8). In a negative or conflictual interaction, however, interlocutors will rather try to maximise difference, moving downward through the nesting hierarchies to identify the level that is most relevant for the interaction. Even those who are closest (relatives or friends) can enter into bitter
conflict or into competition and oppose one another along any line of any difference that exists between them (elder-younger siblings, siblings of different mothers or different fathers, questions of education, personality, etc.) When doing this, they might try to mobilise the support of the groups along which the distinction line runs. If the conflict is between members of the same village, the line of division might run between the different matrilineages or patrilineages. If it is among people living in different villages, villagers might forget about their differences and unite to defend their member against the opposing village. If it is between a Kwanja and a Fulbe, each will try to mobilise the support of his own community.

Thus, “a group identity tends to expand or contract to fill the political space available for its expression” (Horowitz 1975: 137). This maximisation of commonality or difference (also called selfing or othering) implies a process of multi-symbol congruence, as one maximises common points or differences not just according to one criterion, but also to as many as one can find. The slightest common point or difference between individuals can be used to build the fiction of a mutual and total comprehension, or on the contrary to create the illusion of an unbridgeable divide, according to the context and quality of the interaction. Collective identities have a segmentary nature that creates nested structures. The relevant level in a given social interaction, and the positive or negative process of multi-symbol congruence which will result, depends on the position of the interlocutor, what is at stake, and the friendly or conflictual quality of the interaction.

A unified fractal grammar of identity

One of the advantages of focusing on the different characteristics of ethnic identities, across content and across level, is to present the analysis of collective identities as a unified field ruled by the same grammar at all levels of social interaction. One can then reject the arbitrary distinction between orientalism, segmentation and encompassment, proposed by Baumann (2004: 27), as shown in fig. 33. The process of orientalization which conceptualises the other as the reverse mirror-image of self and the process of encompassment of the
other by hierarchical subsumption become two complementary aspects of the common process of segmentation that relies on “othering others” in times of conflict and “selfing others” in times of peaceful interaction (see fig. 34). These two segmentary processes are complementary and constitute the backbone of the structure of collective identities. Moreover, this structure is fractal in nature, since it remains the same for all nested levels of analysis, from kinship groups to nations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Orientalism:</th>
<th>Segmentation:</th>
<th>Encompassment:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self+</td>
<td>Other−</td>
<td>^</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self−</td>
<td>Other+</td>
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</table>

Fig. 33: Three grammars of selfing and othering, according to Baumann (2004: 27)

This unified grammar of identity, which is based on a few simple rules (tension between self-ascription and ascription by others, between an idealized tribe and a complex reality, between selfing and othering, according to context), remains the same, regardless of the content on which the identity builds, the complexity of the social construction or the level of interaction. What distinguishes different collective identities, apart from the variety of diacritical markers on which they rely, is not so much whether they focus on selfing or othering (as both processes happen in respect of all identities, according to context), but rather whether they are open or closed, based on hierarchy or on equality, and allow a plurality of simultaneous membership or not. It is these aspects that can account for the strategies that
surround the situational use of identities. Moreover, by focusing on the common characteristics of collective identities at a variety of levels, it avoids having to make a distinction between “ethnicity” and “kinship” or “nationality” and treats them as similar phenomena distinguished by degree rather than kind.

Finally, the unified grammar allows us to retain the concept of the tribe as an ideal of selfing and othering through multi-symbol congruence that maximizes common points within the group and differences outside. By stressing the gap between the ideal of the tribe and the complex reality found at any level of collective identity, it shows that people stand at the crossroads of multiple identities and can negotiate them situationally. But the direction of such negotiation depends on several factors distinguishing collective identities, such as whether they are open or closed, hierarchical or equal, or defined in terms of “either-or” or “both-and”.

Conclusions

If ethnicity is defined as any collective identity that builds on certain diacritical markers, a we-they feeling and the defence of common interests, then it applies to the Kwanja, as well as to any other collective identity below or above this level. What matters is how this identity is defined and negotiated. Kwanja identity is constructed by the Kwanja elite as an idealised tribe, based on a number of diacritical markers such as language, ancestry, participation in rituals, residence and political allegiance. Each of these criteria is, itself, ideally defined on the basis of another collection of criteria (number of generations in different lines for ancestry; vocabulary, pronunciation for language; beliefs, knowledge and practices for religion, etc.) On the other hand, the Kwanja can be seen as being dissolved into a collection of different nested groups (Nyandung, Nyasunda, Bung, Twendi, Yeka, Weri, Tikar of Kfwan, etc.), ideally defined in accordance with the same collection of criteria given above, and with each group dissolving into a collection of patrilineages based on a similar collection of criteria. At a higher level, the Kwanja form a Manjara alliance with the Mambila, the Wawa and the Bute. One level above, this group of allies forms part of the
Conclusions

non-Fulbe populations of Adamawa, sometimes referred to as “Kirdi” or “Macube”. At the national level, “Kirdi” and “Fulbe” become “Nordistes”. The relevant level will depend on the position of the interlocutor and the quality of the interaction (friendly or conflictual). If Kwanja identity is, in theory, idealized as a collection of criteria that should be coterminous and perfectly fulfilled, the identity of the Kwanja is, in practice, always based on a limited number of these criteria, which are seldom entirely fulfilled or mastered but are therefore more or less close to the ideal Kwanja identity but never perfect. The criteria defining each level of social interaction might change (focusing primarily on the lineage at the village level, on religion or political allegiance at the regional level, or on place of birth and residence at the national level), but the process of multi-symbol congruence will always tend towards the maximization of common points within the group of members but of differences outside it in order to create an “imagined community” (Anderson 1986) and to try and come closer to the ideal of the tribe without ever fully succeeding.

Apart from these specific contents and level, what characterizes Kwanja collective identity is that it is defined as open, equal with other identities found at a comparable level of analysis, and that it is not exclusive but allows for the coexistence of multiple identities. The fact that Fulbe identity is defined very differently, namely as a hierarchical and exclusive identity, and that its openness is ambivalent helps explain much of the process of ethnic passing through which some Kwanja Fulbe-ize.

We have come a long way in describing how Kwanja society is perceived and constructed by different actors. As I have argued in the foregoing chapters, what characterizes the Kwanja is not to be found in the specific forms and contents of their rituals, kinship terminology, history, witchcraft or collective identity, but rather in the common underlying structures from which such specific forms and contents derive. These structures often apply at a variety of levels, whether we are talking about conflict, alliances, misfortunes, rituals, exchanges or collective identities, the apparent complexity found at higher levels being, in the last analysis, qualitatively similar to what happens at lower levels of social interaction.
Studying what happens at local levels of social interaction can therefore often help us understand what happens at more global levels. Common structures running along different nested levels of social organisation can also help us account for diversity within homogeneity and for homogeneity within diversity (when looking at the different groups constituting the Kwanja, or when comparing the Kwanja with their neighbours). Finally, structure does not preclude agency, complexity or unpredictability. Similar structures end up producing widely different and ever-changing outcomes, which is why the former should require more focus than the latter when analysing social organisations.
GLOSSARY

Bandá gywâni  Epilepsy (the "disease of the fall")
Bandá hwâmâni  Disease of the (swollen) belly
  Bâni  Last enthronement ceremony, allowing a chief to
        be buried seated
Bô  Poison ordeal
Bôrfi  Red
Bôŋ  Matrilineage
Bwârbî  Long piece of bamboo with feathers, attached to the
       leading mask among the Yeka and Weri
Côr  Two persons (with at least one woman) of associated
     patrilineage
Côrkibî  Liana attached as belt and necklace to chiefs undergo-
         ing a bâni
Cirinî  Either patrilineage, patriclan, or geographical grouping
Ciändâ söò  Cutting the söò: sacrificing a chicken with an oath
Dôômímâ  Dance practiced by the Njanga
Fâñndî  Herb used by notables and father of twins during a dance
Fânî  Wedding
Fèrî  Shame
Foô bîťâ  Bad wind/spirit
Fûforî  Reed rubbed for the nyéëmi, and used as whistle for the
        kôbiibi
Gôri  Bird whose red feathers can only be worn by chiefs
Jemî yerî  Tail of buffalo. For chiefs only. Usually decorated with
           cowries
Jimbà  Song of the sêrbî
Jîrî  Taboo
Kâñmbî  Peace tree in the courtyard of chiefs. Also refers to the
       mourning necklace made out of the bark of this tree, and
       to the ceremony of cutting the necklaces (kaâra kâñmbî),
       that ends the mourning
Kári  Curse, oath
Kôrmî bôrfi  Red oil (palm oil)
Kfwirâ  Tree (camwood?). Its red wood is pounded and used in
       rituals
Kôbiibi  Whistles that imitate the cry of twin babies
Kpôrô  Chiefly taboo
Lânî máán  Matrilineage (one/same intestine)
Lôrbî  What is planted (a chicken plus tâkaŋngá fruits on a
       sisongo) in front of the door of those who should con-
       tribute to a masquerade
Glossary

Lwèrì  Herb held by those who direct the song of a sòò, held by chiefs and thrown by masks in the house of organisers,
Mamburù  Tree; one holds its branch with the left hand when singing a sòò
Mbûtù  Poison
Mbèrà  Hereditary witchcraft
Mbèrà máán  Matrilineage (one/same witch)
Mbíri gòrí  Marching rhythm of dance (when a leopard or chief is dead)
Meenyèëngí  "Mother of twins", rhombus said to be a mother comforting twins
Mgbányíri  God (chief of spirit). Pl. mgbányíbi (chief of spirits)
Mgbátíbi  A type of sorcery
Mon tìr  Child from above
Nabi karabi  Couscous on bags, last meal ending a masquerade
Ndàñ  Fault derived from hitting one’s parents
Ndíñndì  Relation between two men of associated patrilineages
Ndòòbi  Songs of ancestors advising people, sometimes sung in a reed. It used to be a first-fruit ritual but is now practiced during a kàñmbì
Ndúnngíì  Piece of wood used to purify people after a transgression
Ngìndì mbò  Tree whose bark is used for the poison ordeal
Ngýwámi  Leaves used in divination
Njáb bitá  Bad words
Njáñì  Alliance, gizzard
Njàñndì  Spicy leaves crushed. With salt and chili (hot) or without (cold)
Njáranjì  Licentious songs sung in a reed. Practices together with a ndòòbi
Njìì  Bush onion
Nyèèmì  Animal (friction drum) that cries at the death, satìgà, kàñmbì and bànì of chiefs, parents of twins, and important people.
Nyìrí - nyìbì  Spirit(s)
Nyà  Grandmother
Nyirkúní  Shadow
Õgóórí  Throne
Õgywàrà  Stick of notables, made of woven straps of buffalo skin
Õyvéñí  A magical power (transmutation into animals or elements)
Õyvwòò  A magical power (sending multitudes of enemies or pests)
Sàñndì  Divination, consultation
Sàràrí mbwàrà  Whisks of leopard
Glossary

Satigà  Ceremony during which inheritance is shared
Sirbi  Mask representing the spirit of deceased persons
Sirbi wàrì  White mask, representing the kinless inventor of masquerades
Sòò  Obscene songs (women), wrestling (men) practised at kàñmbi and bàñi
Suu njùn  Pour the rancour
Sàti  Sacrifice to ancestors
Tàkaañngà  Fruits given to those who participate in a masquerade, attached to chicken before a nàbi karàbi and to doors where a Bung child has been born
Tàmbóó  Grandfather
Tàmbàñbà  Masks of Nyaku
Tànìmkòstì  Anonymous and Whipping mask
Tàri  Needle (a type of sorcery)
Tàsàñnàbì  War dance
Tòùri  Ceremony in which a chief is enthroned and given his powers
Tìbkà  Sacred place, where masks, sòò and Ndòôbi are made/practised
Tìndjòó  Women without any operative hereditary witchcraft
Tàbi  A type of sorcery
Wàrààn  A light and refreshing maize beer, diluted with water
Wàrí  White
Wòôrábi  Leprosy
Yôrí  Black
Yôrá ndàñ  Beat the fault
## NAMES OF CHIEFS AND PLACES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bandam</td>
<td>Bāmndūŋ (Tikar chief and village, Bandam in French)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bang</td>
<td>Bāŋ (Trench of Nyara)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangir</td>
<td>Bāṅgīr (Trench of Nyambece)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bankim</td>
<td>Kīmī (Tikar chief and village, Bankim in French)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bapurka</td>
<td>Bāpūr ḫā (Trench of Nyayimber)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basara</td>
<td>Bāsārī (Trench of Nyagbe)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Batikong</td>
<td>Bwātīkō (Tikar chief and village, Batikong in French)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bung</td>
<td>Būŋ (Trench of Nyamecar)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bungba</td>
<td>Būŋbā (People)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bungni</td>
<td>Būŋnī (Dialect)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bute</td>
<td>Sg.-dialect Būti pl. Būtībi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camba</td>
<td>Camba (Trench of Nyarban)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camga</td>
<td>Cāmāṅā (Trench of Nyamban)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dungtab</td>
<td>Dūŋtāb (mountain of the Njanga)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fagh</td>
<td>Fāgh (Trench of Nyambisam, within Merka)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faghyi</td>
<td>Fāghyī (people descended from Nyambisam)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gebu</td>
<td>Gābū (notable of Mbonger)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gwamga</td>
<td>River near Timbra, on the territory of Yangogwam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humbin</td>
<td>Hūmbin (notable of Mbonger)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kabien</td>
<td>Kāb-yen (mountain)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kembam</td>
<td>Kēmbām (Bung chief), also called Banda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kfwan</td>
<td>Kfwaṅ (Tikar village)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kponjam</td>
<td>Kpōṅnjam (quartier of Yimbere)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kur</td>
<td>Kūr (Trench of Ngom)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kwanja</td>
<td>Kwānja (kwé in Tikar or Mambila)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lārānī</td>
<td>Working party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lāngānī</td>
<td>Bush onion used in the meal when someone died of a big belly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mabiri</td>
<td>Mābirī (notable of Nyawangung)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masu</td>
<td>Māsā (notable of Nyanjim)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mawang</td>
<td>Mawān (one of the trenches of Njonger)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mberba</td>
<td>sg. Mbārī pl. Mbōrbā (migrants fighting Nyamban and Yimbere)</td>
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<td>Mbōnām (notable of Nyanjim)</td>
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<td>Mbonjanga</td>
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<td>Mbonger</td>
<td>Mbōngār (trench and chief)</td>
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<td>Mbongjanga</td>
<td>Mbōnjān (Mbongjanga in French)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mbonse</td>
<td>Mbōnse (notable of Ngom)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mbotim</td>
<td>Mbōtīm (notable of Nyanjim)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memo</td>
<td>Mīmīṣ (Notable of Nyiyar)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merka</td>
<td>Mārkā (Grand trench of Nyamgba and Nyambisam)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Names of chiefs and places

Mewa  Miwá (notable of Nyawangung, then Nyamecar, then Nyaku)
Mingabsin  Mingábsin (Trench of Ndek-Yi)
Muko  Múkò (notable of Nyakong)
Ndek-Yi  Ndák-yí (People)
Ndumjom  Ndúmjóm (village)
Ndun  Ndùwùn (ndûn in Tikar)
Ndung  Ndúng (Dialect)
Ngarie  Êgàryó (Trench of Nyangba)
Ngisam  Êgisàm (Trench of Nyiyrar)
Ngo  Êgòò (village of Njonger)
Ngom  Êgòm (Nyasunda chief)
Njam-Njam  Njám-Njám (forest of Nyiyrar in the plain)
Njango  Njàngá (chief and people) (pl. Njààngábà or Nyàjààngá)
Ngangane  Njàngáñi (dialect)
Njonger  Njöngér (notable of Mbonger)
Nyabia  Nyábià (Twendi chief)
Nyacam  Nyácám (people descending from Nyamban)
Nyafama  Nyáfàmá (Twendi chief)
Nyagbe  Nyàgbè (notable of Ngom)
Nyagum  Nyàgùm
Nyakék  Nyàkék (notable of Nyanjim)
Nyakong  Pòòkùñ (Nyakong in French)
Nyaku  Nyákù (notable of Nyamban, then independent, then of Yimbere)
Nyalen  Nyálùn (notable of Nyanjim)
Nyamakpir  Nyàmákpir (Nyandung chief)
Nyamban  Nyàmbán (Nyusunda chief)
Nyambece  Nyàmbicé (notable of Ngom)
Nyamber  Nyàmbèr (chief of the past, living next to the Njango)
Nyambi  Nyàmbì (Notable of Nyamban, names him)
Nyambsam  Nyàmbísam (notable of Nyangba then independent)
Nyombojom  Nyàmbójóm (notable of Nyiyrar)
Nyamboya  Nyàmbònyañ (Nyandung chief of Bute origin)
Nyamecar  Nyàmicáí (Bung chief)
Nyamgba  Nyàmgba (Nyandung chief)
Nyandung  Nyàndùng (people)
Nyangiar  Nyàngiàr (notable of Kembam)
Nyangywa  Nyàngwyà (Nyandung chief)
Nyanjanga  Nyàŋjààngá (People). See also under Njango
Nyanjen  Nyàŋjèn (people descending from Nyaku)
Nyanjim  Nyàŋnièm (Nyandung chief)
Nypadn  Nyàødñ (notable of Nyanjim)
Nyara  Nyààra (Twendi chief, notable of Yimbere)
Nyarban  Nyàribàn (Twendi chief, notable of Yimbere)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Names of chiefs and places</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nyasunda Nyàsùndà (People)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nyawangung Nyàwàngàŋù (Yeka chief)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nyawara Nyàwàrâ (Nyandung chief)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nyayimber Nyàyimbôr (Nyasunda chief)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nyikum Nyìkûm (Nyandung chief)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nyinjang Nyìnjàn (notable of Mbonjanga, nominating him)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nyinyem Nyìnyèm (notable of Mbonjanga)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nyiyab Nyìyâb (Nyandung chief)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nyiyar Nyìyàr (Nyandung chief)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pangari Pangâr (Trench of Nyanjim), Pangari in French</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanga Sàngâ (Trench of Nyafàmà)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Singo Sinìngò (one of the trenches of Njonger)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sundani Sundàndì (dialect)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tikar Sg. Ìjàóùrà - Pl. Ìjàóùbà (People) - ìjàóùrì (dialect)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timbi Timbì (Trench of Nyinyem)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Timbra Tímbùrà (Mountain of Yangogwam)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Timijom Tímìnjòm (Tikar chief)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Titambon Titààmùn (notable of Tiwer)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tiwer Tíwòr (Chief from Langa area)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Twama Twàmà (notable of Tiwer-Titambon)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Twendi Twéëëndì (Dialect or people, sing.); Tònìbà (plur.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wer Wòr (trench of Tiwer)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Werba Wàrùbà (people) (sg: Wàrì)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wungjung Wùnìjù (forest of Nyambojóm, old village of Nyamboya)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yangogwam Yàngòògwàùm (Notable of Ngom)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yeka/Yeeba Yèkà (sing. People); Yèèbà (plur. People)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yeni Yèènì (Dialect)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yimbere Nyàyimbôr (Yimbére in French)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yonga Yöngà (Trench of Nyaku)</td>
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