1 Sample of One: joining the queue

Lives/Introduction

This book is about Diko Madeleine, a senior Mambila woman. I use her life history to explore aspects of the history of her village in the twentieth century. First I consider some of the theoretical background to this project and discuss life-writing, biography and autobiography. In this Chapter I introduce Diko and how I came to know her. In Chapter 2 I discuss some of the theoretical background to this project and I examine some of the precedents for this exercise and the theoretical conundrums that they pose. I also consider three contrasting approaches to writing life stories: those of the anthropologist as ghost-writer, as hagiographer and as biographer.

The main concern of this book is how to understand the ways in which Mambila people talk about themselves and the past. Part of the motivation for this project came from Diko herself. In one of our conversations, about rituals then being performed either incorrectly or not at all, she said:

> They should make a book of it; and write it down.
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> What we are saying should be written down, then tomorrow when we're all dead they'll say 'Oh Koko said this, Koko said this, Koko said this' (Koko is Diko's honorific nickname).

There is also an important analytic point which should be made from the outset: I believe that not only the history recounted by Diko but also the manner in which it is told reveal aspects of Mambila society and, importantly, ways in which Mambila understand their society.[1] Although of course only Mambila speakers can assess the accuracy of the translations, the use of digital technology will enable the original recordings to be made available so that the actual transcripts can be checked. A new range of criticism is opened up: at the very least others can assess some of the basis on which this anthropologist reached his conclusions about Mambila society. This is where the approach of the ethnography of speaking in general, and pragmatics in particular, may be used to analyse aspects of Mambila society such as their kinship system, gender relations, the forms of Mambila chiefship and its development in the twentieth century. So everyday speech forms part of the evidence for my understanding of aspects of Mambila society. Both the content and the structure of the conversations, not just semantics, but the way they develop, help illuminate how Mambila society works. Not only can I discuss the meanings of words, I can also consider Mambila

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[1] Here the inverse parallel with Marcel Griaule's 'Conversations with Ogotomeli' (1965) is worth drawing: what we do not know of Griaule's conversations is legion. Those conversations occurred in a mix of Dogon and French and the role of Griaule's translator, 'Sergeant Koguem' (p18), is never explored. Here, by contrast, we have access to the words that were spoken.

discussions of meanings of words. And the way in which such discussion takes place provides part of the basis for the sociological conclusions.

Introduction: Gaps and absences

My subject is life histories in general, and one Mambila life in particular: that of Diko Madeleine. When I set out to write Diko's life history, after eighteen years of conversations with her, I was dismayed to realise how little relevant material I had. Confronted with the task of summarising and presenting Diko's life history to a critical readership, all I seemed to have were some fragments from a life. When I listened to the tape-recorded conversations again, what had initially seemed rich in detail and full of promise was revealed to be full of gaps and half-starts: the beginnings of stories never completed; and corrections made uncertainly so that the listener cannot tell if they were maintained or whether second or third thoughts prevailed. Worse still, there was a lot of very conventional talk that held today's youth up to the standards of the past and found it wanting. That older people complain about disobedient youth is scarcely surprising. Neither is it noteworthy that much has changed since Diko was young. This seemed little return after eighteen years of fieldwork! However, there was something to be learned from the recordings: they do illustrate some of the ways in which Mambila people see themselves and their relationships, and how they talk about them. As well as reflecting upon my inadequacies as a fieldworker, my fieldnotes and recordings reveal some interesting anthropological consequences of what was ***not*** said, as well as what was said.

Given the constraints of writing for a non-Mambila audience, and of the space available, I concentrate here, not on the words spoken, but on the context, which I use to illuminate a few small examples. I am not presenting here an analysis of the spoken conversations themselves (which I intend to address elsewhere). Nonetheless, the recordings form the foundation of my analysis. My confidence that what I say is empirically responsible is secured by the tape recordings and transcripts which I made of the conversations between Diko and Sondue (and others). Their existence, available to my Mambila-speaking critical audience, serves as a stop or corrective: as I write, I am aware of how I can justify what I say, not only to my professional peers, but also to my Mambila critics.

There is a another absence to acknowledge. Such are the requirements to contextualise and to explain that Diko's personality seems to have escaped this text. However, the same can sometimes be said of autobiography. Despite the approach of Ricoeur (1971) people are ***not*** texts, and any attempt to reduce one to the other will inevitably fail (a type of reductionist failure). What I can do, though, is to sketch aspects of the person, along with fragments of the background to her life: to draw a silhouette.

Once the wider context of Diko's life has been established, we can consider the details, although the understanding of the context was established in part by reference to, and because of, problems with the details. Over the years, such details have acted as a ladder which I have climbed in my progress towards an understanding of Mambila society. Moving from the spoken words to the background assumptions enables me to escape what Lila Abu-Lughod (1993: 22) calls the 'relentless specificity' of a concern with a single person and a single telling, allowing a more general account of Mambila society in the twentieth century. This uses the conversations with and the stories told by Diko as the starting points for ethnographical exploration. So, in subsequent Chapters I present a series of ethnographic vignettes based on the events of Diko's life.

Talking Mambila

Before considering some of the precedents to the exercise (in the next Chapter) I shall now give an introduction to the recordings I have made. In a later Chapter I introduce Somié village and Mambila culture in more detail, but first I would like to describe the research processes that led to the making of the tape recordings, which form the empirical bedrock of this book.

Diko and I

Diko Madeleine was born around 1910 during the German occupation of Cameroon. The German-built road was then still active, passing through Somié on its way between the colonial centre of Bali and the fort at Banyo in the north. She grew up with tales of German brutality and heard how her parents' generation fled forced labour, just as her own generation would attempt to flee the forced labour exacted (in lieu of tax) by the French who succeeded the Germans in that part of Cameroon.

I knew Diko for more than a decade and a half. Each time I left the village I said farewell fearing that she would not be there when I next returned. In her last years she became increasingly frail and did not walk for several years.

When I first went to Somié in 1985 I lived in one of her daughters' houses, beside and behind her own. Her grandson, Jonas Koum, was one of my main companions and language teachers in my first year in the village. I started working in Diko's house, pointing at household objects (first with my hand, then in proper Mambila manner with my lower lip) and asking their name and purpose. It was only later that I realised what an important person Diko was. To begin with she was one of the few older people who would tolerate for any length of time the banality of a linguistic simpleton. Later, she became an important informant for me on the history and traditions of the village.

As a language learner I did not spend much time with the older and senior people in the village. Most of the seniors had little tolerance for the childish questions of a naive language learner. Diko put up my questions from the start, although she told me clearly when she was too busy, or just tired of me and my questions. Now that I can speak Mambila I find I spend little time with those who helped me learn the language. The one prominent exception was Diko with whom I spent time from the beginning of my visits to Somié.

As time passed after my initial fieldwork, and as I continued to make regular visits to Somié, we graduated to matters of greater moment. For example, in the run-up to the biennial *ŋgwun* festival, elders of all sorts, even occasionally the Chief himself, came to see Diko to check, confirm or receive instructions about how the rite should be performed. Sometimes I feel that all I did was to join the queue!

Diko's life history provided her with knowledge which is available to few others: she was the first wife of one chief, the mother of another, and the widowed mother of a deceased chief. In June 2003 she became grandmother to the new chief (a son of her son Menandi) Ndi Adam, who was installed on 21 June 2003.

Born in what is now Nigeria among the Mambila living on the uplands of the Mambila Plateau, she met and then married Konaka, with whom she moved down to the Somié village on the Tikar Plain, then at its previous site. Later Konaka became Chief of Somié and Diko was the first wife of a chief who enjoyed a relatively long reign and effectively managed the transition from the yoke of the FulBe Lamidate of Banyo (who regularly exacted tribute in slaves and in kind) to the tutelage of the French colonial

administration (sometimes just as exacting through the corvée labour system) which often used FulBe from Banyo as intermediaries.

During this time missionaries came to the Tikar Plain and the first churches were constructed. At first they were regarded as being similar to the witchcraft eradication cults which regularly swept the area, but slowly a more sophisticated understanding of Christianity developed. Diko became involved, both in her own right (she was a devoted member of the Lutheran Church) and through her children: her son Ndi became a Catholic. As first wife of the chief she also played a major part in several traditional rituals, so she was one of those most concerned to establish a viable accommodation between the traditional religion and the message of the missionaries. In December 1949 Konaka died and in 1950 Ndi became chief. As mother of the new chief, Diko continued to play an important, although not a formally recognised, role in village affairs. Ndi died in a car crash in 1953 and thereafter she acted as unofficial adviser to the village seniors: by Mambila standards she was already mature at the time of Ndi's death. At the time of her death she was the oldest person in the village.
When I first went to Somié in 1985 one of Diko's great friends was Nji, a Bamum retainer of the Chief, who became one of the *mgbe lə* (ritual chiefs) who are in charge of the biennial *ŋgwun* rite. This marks the enstoolment of a new chief and subsequently allows him to repeat his oath of office and be ritually strengthened during its regular performances.

About the interviews

Diko is a significant person for me both in her own right and as an informant. These are categorically not the same thing: some significant and knowledgeable people do not want to talk to anthropologists. Others do, but find it hard to explain to cultural dullards like me. On the other hand some, like Diko, manage to juggle the profundity of their knowledge and their ability to explain. Not everyone is a natural teacher.

For all our long background of talking to each other, when I finally tried to sit down with her and start working on her life history I found that the conversation quickly reduced to something that far more closely resembled the talk between Marjorie Shostak and Bey (discussed below) than that between Marcel Griaule and Ogotemeli.

As a way out of the impasse I then tried something out that I had long been considering: I asked Sondue Michel to visit Diko and to tape record their conversations so that he and I could go through it afterwards. The conversations that resulted were the starting point for this book.

When I asked Sondue to visit and talk with Diko I gave him some indications of the sorts of things I wanted to learn about and he scribbled notes on a scrap of paper. These he occasionally refers to in the recorded conversations (after a pause when a conversational thread runs down, Sondue introduces a new topic using a third person pronoun, for example 'he wants to know how you met your husband'.)

I then listened to the tapes and went through them with Sondue, stopping the recorder and making notes as we listened. Several years passed in which I thought about the recordings but was not able to find a framework to use them. During this period I continued to work with Sondue and since the Mambila literacy project (coupled with a Bible translation) was getting underway I encouraged him to learn to write Mambila so I could give him work transcribing some of the recordings that I had made. More recently I commissioned a new transcription from Ciebe Daniel who is very active in the literacy project. This gave me a second perspective on the tapes and the subjects discussed in them, which has informed the discussion in this and the following Chapters.

By presenting the ethnographic context which non-Mambila readers need, distance is inevitably introduced, since Diko and Sondue take the context for granted, as unstated

commonplace. Perhaps this parallels, for example, the physical distance between Diko and those now reading her words, who were previously unfamiliar with her name.

The voice which I hope can emerge is that of an experienced and somewhat exasperated doyenne who regrets the passing of the old order while still appreciating the new. Diko has a place alongside other Africans who have helped anthropologists at different times and in different places: Muchona the Hornet, who taught Victor Turner much of what he knew about Ndembu cosmology, and, dare I say it, Griaule's key informant, the blind hunter Ogotomeli, who revealed the deep truths of Dogon cosmology to him. However, the latter is a slightly misleading comparison, for this is not an account of revelation instigated by Diko: she did not initiate the conversations. Nor is there as much at stake: the conversations are not about the central keys to understanding Mambila cosmology. They have a far more modest starting point in Diko's own life history, which has considerable overlap with the recent history of Somié village itself. I can provide a commentary to help unpack some of the more elliptical sections and use the transcript as a peg on which to hang more ethnography. Consider this short extract:

> MS; What about your children? I was together with them at Suawe's place.
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> DM; And another one which I called Menandi died, that was when Kung was in my arms, when he was in my arms, when Ndi was himself like so (indicates his height). Ndi was just little. Kung and another that they called Nuaga.
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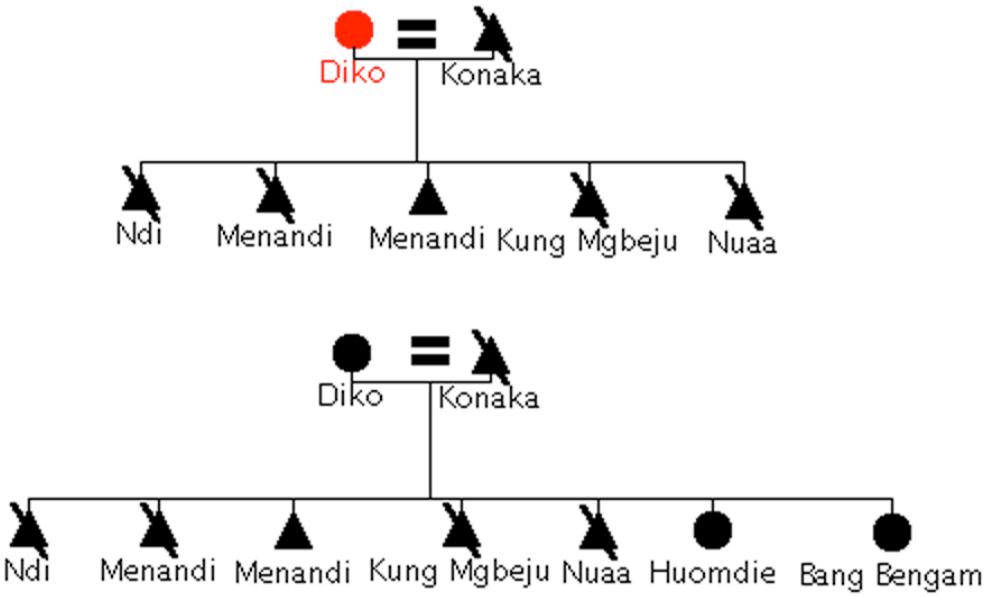
> MS; Another that they called Nuaga
>
> DM; Another that they called Nuaga who was just like Nde. They were the same! Nde was after him. Nde that died just now. Those were my children. They were five.
>
> Note: Nde Donat (b 1945 d 1988) was an age-mate of Nuaga.



It was in response to elliptical statements such as this that Rivers developed the genealogical method that has been so central to social anthropology ever since. What we can see in this passage is a set of nested knowledges about Diko's genealogy. Some of this knowledge she presumes is known to Sondue, the other speaker, and these assumptions are tested in a later passage. What strikes me is the contrast between the information in exchanges such as this, and the results of the genealogical method which I have used on other occasions to elicit Diko's genealogy myself. What the transcript reveals is Diko's perception of her own

genealogy - the 'online editing' she performs upon her own history reveals the light in which she herself sees that genealogy. Mostly importantly here she is editing out ALL of her daughters, and telling him only about her sons although he asked about her children. What she tells Sondue is satisfactory in a literal sense - it satisfies him (for the moment), it is adequate and therefore passes muster. What I want to attempt is to sketch the bounds of the muster-ground - the sense of adequacy which is demonstrably shared by the speakers since they let it pass - it is literally unquestioned, and forms the backdrop to the conversation. That Sondue was prompted in his questions by an academic anthropologist then serves as an interesting test case: in so far as he is able to make the questions make sense to Diko we are in fairly standard territory of interpreting the texts of indigenous informants. However, at other moments both Sondue and Diko struggle to understand what on earth is being sought and when the conversation breaks down for these and other reasons (such as Diko forgetting that Sondue is significantly younger than her (he was in his mid 40s at the time of making the recordings). At these points we are able to see, discursively displayed, as it were, parts of Mambila sociology that I am trying to synthesise. The point of this sort of endeavour is to link the theories of pragmatics with mainstream anthropology.

Initial Conclusions

Anthropology confers an odd, unchosen, immortality. It is a literary product but a bizarre one: the names of a few individuals (Nisa, Baba of Karo, Ogotemeli and Muchona are the obvious African examples) will certainly be long remembered in ways in which most of their friends and contemporaries will not. Historians working in European archives are accustomed to talking of individuals who have been dead for centuries, and know them so well that some can recognise the handwriting of, for example, Queen Elizabeth the First. She is a historic personality and much history revolves around her.

But I write this in an age of subaltern studies (which attempts to understand groups_ usually disregarded, ignored or disparaged by the ruling elites who were the over-riding concern of historians) and as an anthropologist. Often as a by-product of other interests, some anthropology may contribute to archives. Anthropologists create documents about those whose lives would otherwise probably not be archived. In this sense we accrete material for future subaltern studies, for future generations of researchers of many different disciplines. Diko may not have influenced Cameroonian history as Elizabeth did British history, but she deserves attention nonetheless: hers is an important and influential voice on the stage of village politics, if not that of the nation state.

That said, working with Diko neither was nor is, an archival exercise for me. As anthropologist rather than historian, the material I can archive remains a by-product, however welcome. For me, the conversations with Diko (both my own and those which I have lovingly followed on tape) help to reveal Mambila society by revealing her understanding of it. By understanding something of how she sees the play of systems of power and authority (without ever using such terms) and how they have changed over the last century we can understand Mambila society a little better. That is a conclusion with which I think she would be satisfied.