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ELDRIDGE MOHAMMADOU ON TIKAR ORIGINS

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Introduction

ELDRIDGE MOHAMMADOU has recently published (1990) a detailed overview of the history of the groups in Southern Adamawa. This is the first survey to be published since the International African Institute survey volumes of the 1950s, and the work is a testimony to Mohammadou's considerable field-work throughout the area. Although specialists may differ with Mohammadou with regard to the details, both he and his publishers, ILCAA,[1] should be praised for making this synthesis available. It challenges the workers in the field to improve their data and to take account of the wider context, both historical and geographical. This contrasts with the specific focus of anthropologists concerned with single groups. So, for example, Mohammadou challenges Tardits' account of Bamun history (1980) by putting it in the general context of the history of pre-colonial Cameroon. This allows him to take into account their interaction with neighbouring populations in a wide historical perspective. Mohammadou does not subscribe to any crude version of diffusionism nor to the narrow views of a local socio-political auto-genesis or the systematic belief of spontaneous generation. In another publication, he concludes: 'This short-sightedness in historical perspective seems to us to be directly inherited from the inadequacies of the African historiography of the colonial era whose domi-

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nating tendency favoured ethnic and partitioned histories of Africa. It is high time that the present generations rediscover the great underlying and fundamental unity of the history of Africa in general and that of the history of Cameroon in particular' (1986: 271).[2]

The origin of the Tikar, which has recently been discussed by Fowler and Zeitlyn (1996), is a case in point: the issue of Tikar origins has been a leitmotif of studies in the Grassfields, and although resolved in general terms for the Grassfield groups themselves (Chilver and Kaberry 1971; Jeffreys 1964; Price 1979), the identity of the Tikar remains something of a historical puzzle. There are, in fact, two questions of origin. Unfortunately, a failure to distinguish between them has led to the persistence of the problem in the literature. How we should explain the Grassfield polities that claim a Tikar origin is a separate question from the origin of the Tikar people living on the Tikar Plain, who speak the Tikar language.

Hence, it seems fitting to present Sally Chilver with a summary of Eldridge Mohammadou's work on Tikar origins, as a tribute both to Sally herself—who has so often produced epitomes of work otherwise inaccessible and distributed copies to her colleagues along the 'Kingston Road Samizdat network'—and to Eldridge Mohammadou. Mohammadou is explicitly concerned with wider regional issues. The summary below is my own synopsis (or epitome) of Mohammadou's summary of his argument (Mohammadou 1990: 287–99).

Eldridge Mohammadou's Survey of Tikar History

The main question at issue is the origin of the founders of the dynasties and the palace institutions of the different Tikar-speaking groups. How much credit is to be given to claims of Mbum origin? To answer this, a variety of evidence must be considered, including oral tradition and historical linguistics. The nomenclatures used by different groups, both for themselves and, for example, for the Mbum, provide another source of evidence.

The main hypothesis is that the Tikar kingdoms of the middle Mbam arose from invasions of Bâré-Chamba in the second half of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century. There are two subsidiary hypotheses. First, the sequence of the formation of the Tikar kingdoms and their overthrow dates from a more recent period than has been previously supposed. Second, following from this, the ethnonym connot-

2. Readers should also note that Mohammadou's regional perspective has led to an interesting difference in opinion about the explanations for the 'demographic crisis' of central Cameroon, which appears to have been severely depopulated in the nineteenth century. Whereas Hurault (e.g. 1969) identifies the FulBe as the main agents of this change, Mohammadou sees them as latecomers following in the tracks of the Bâré-Chamba.

ing the political and cultural 'Tikar' only dates from this period. The connection with the Mbum is then a secondary re-interpretation.

Historical summary

The Bâré-Chamba preceded the FulBe and were pushed south by them in their turn. Passing by the towns of Tibati and Banyo, they then pushed south in the corridor formed by the Mbum and Kim rivers to the south-west of Tibati. This resulted in the first generation of Tikar kingdoms. They then moved west, founding Nditam on the way to Fumban, Nso', Bafut and Baleng. Subsequent waves of Bâré-Chamba invaders attacked these first-generation kingdoms and also founded second-wave kingdoms such as Ngambe, Béŋ-Béŋ, Kong, Ina and Wé. Chronologies for some of these chiefdoms (based on chief lists) give foundation dates as follows: Bankim 1760–80; Nditam 1767–81; Ngambé 1788–1809; Kong 1795.

Nomenclature

There are four series of names:

(1) Tìkár(í), Tikr, Tìkálí, Tìgár, Tìgâ, Tìgé, Tìgê, ngír (Tí-ngír)—used by some of the Tikar kingdoms and by Mbum of Tibati from whom the FulBe borrowed the term 'Tikar', e.g. Ngambe and Nditam.
(2) Tìmù, Tìmù, Tùmù, Tùúm, Twùmwù—used on the Tikar Plain around Bankim and among the neighbours of the Tikar on the plain: the Mambila and Kwanja.
(3) ʈɔ̀ɔ̀ŋ, ʈwɔ̀ŋ, ŋtɔ̀ɔ̀ŋ, ŋtwɔ̀ŋ—used in the small kingdoms between the River Mbum and River Kim, such as Ina, Wé and ŋbɗŋ-ŋbɗŋ.
(4) ŋdom, Ndòmé, Ndòmɬ, Ndòbɬ, Ndòb′, Ndobw′, Ndobe, Ndòbò, Ndòbà, Ndòb, Ndòp—used by Vuté both in the north around Banyo/Tibati and in the south around Yoko, as well as in the Grassfields themselves.

There are two base roots for these names: Tí for the first two, Ndób or Ndó' for the second two. Ndób/Ndó is the oldest.[3] The base root is dó or dɔ̀. It should be noted that the /b/ affix is the plural in the surrounding Mambiloid languages (it occurs as both an prefix and suffix in different Mambila dialects). In particular, when repeated on either side of a proper name it denotes a group. Hence, in Mambila bɔ̀ ɔwe bɔ̀ are the Kwe people (the Kwanja). Therefore, we can explain Vuté or Vútɨb as deriving from bɨTíbɨ or vɨTíbɨ (bɨ - Tí - bɨ) —that is, the Tí.

Turning next to Tí, the second root. Tùmù is taken to derive from Tí-mò, which can be glossed as 'the Tù person', or 'the Tí'. It should be

3. For example, Koelle 1963: 20 gives the Tikar for person as *ndób/budób*.

noted that both Tùmù and Ndób are used in Bankim, while Tìgê and Ndòmé occur on the left bank of the Mbam at Ngambe, Kong and the Bâré-Chamba term for 'chief'. Hence, Tì-gâ is the Chief of the Ti. The Ti (and their chief) conquered the Ndòb/Ndom to create the Bankim kingdom. The conquering chief then installed his followers on the right bank of the Mbam River. These were known as the Ti of the Chief, i.e. Ti-ga or Tikar.

One of the goals of the following historical reconstruction is to explain the relationship between the Bâré-Chamba chiefs (gá) and the population called Tí.

Historical reconstruction

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, central Cameroon from Mbum and Djérem in the north (Tibati) to the Mbam and Sanaga rivers in the south (from Bafia to Bélabo) was occupied by a Bantu-speaking population called Tí or bàTí. At this point the Vuté were on the Tignère Plateau. The Ndombɨ (ancestors of the Tikar) were in the zone between Vuté and the Ti (to their south)—that is, on the edge of Adamawa from Ngoundal to Tibati as well as the Banyo Plateau. Although different ethnonyms are used, it should be stressed that the Ndombɨ and the Mbum of the high plateau of Ngaoundere formed a cultural continuum.

The descent of the Vuté to the south pushed the Ndombɨ further south still, in part on to the Yoko Plateau and into the Middle Mbum as well as on to the Tikar Plain. This southwards pressure forced a corresponding movement of the Tí to their south. The southwards movement of the Vuté separated the Ndombɨ from the Mbum. The Vuté took the Tí town of Tibati, and while retaining their own language they adopted the denomination of the autochthones, Bàtí or Bute/Vuté. This occurred in the middle of the eighteenth century. It was at this time that the first raids of the Bâré-Chamba left the Upper High Benue.[4] One branch went west and founded the Jukun kingdoms and the Chamba chiefdom of Donga, etc. Another branch came down on to the Tignère plateau to Tibati, where it split into three parts. From Tibati subsequent raids left in different directions: to the west, in the direction of the Mbum headquarters and the Banyo Plateau; to the south-west, in the corridor formed by the Middle Mbum and the Kim, to the Tikar country; to the south, towards Yoko and the Sanaga; to the east, between Djérem and Lom, towards Pangar and Bétaré-Oya.

These raids are now scarcely remembered in comparison to the FulBe raids of the nineteenth century. The raiders proceeded in a succession of leaps, pushing refugees before them, marrying and settling where they had conquered, thereby changing their ethnic identity. But they are characterized by their use of horses, poisoned arrows and being accompanied by a large group of smiths. Also, the extreme nature of the raids marked a

4. This is well before the beginning of the Sokoto Jihad.

change in the patterns of warfare in the region. These raids, like those of the FulBe who followed them, were marked by burning, pillaging, and the massacre of both old people and those they could not enslave.

In fifty years this changed the whole of central Cameroon. The autochthones fled south, depopulating the central zone to the benefit of the central forest and the Grassfields. Hence the Chamba raids caused the last savannah Bantus to cross the Sanaga river, as well as resulting in the arrival of Ndobe (Tikar) people in the Grassfields.

Sociologically speaking, what happened was that the predominant segmentary, acephalous societies were replaced by different chiefdoms with different degrees of centralization which facilitated the formation of five dynasties. Some of the Ti clustered into small groups on the right bank of the Sanaga and retained the name Bati. Tibati itself, a chiefdom formed of a mixture of Vuté and Ti before the Chamba conquered it, was ripe for Chamba expansion. Some of these Tibatí chiefs (Ti-gâ) fled the Chamba towards the Tikar Plain, where they found small chiefdoms of the Ndombi, which they conquered, forming their own chiefdoms on that foundation, e.g. Bamkim. Conquered by invaders, these autochthonous chiefdoms gave rise to the 'Mbum origin' story.

What of the Mbum themselves? Since the FulBe conquest, the Mbum have been found near Tibati (the frontiers follow the River Mére and its tributary the River Mawor). Consider the possibility that the Mbum were on the Adamawa Plateau before the Vuté and were already in the Tibati area beside the Ti when the Vuté arrived. In that case, they would only have been pushed a few kilometres further east when the Vuté took their place. The central Mbum group were the Wari, centred on Àsòm or Sòm (now called Mballassom). Granted this, the origins of what are now called the Mbum can be explained with a double hypothesis. First, Mbum migrations to the Ndómbɨ occurred before the Chamba invasion. These must have reached the Mbam/Kimi confluence and founded 'Tikar chiefdoms' among the indigenous Ndómbɨ before the middle of the eighteenth century in the course of which they adopted the Ndómbɨ language.

This is the locally held version of events. There are no external forces motivating the migrations, nor the export of the 'Tikar model' to the Grassfields. However, the suggested chronology poses problems for this version of events, suggesting that the Mbum migration coincides with the arrival of the Bâré-Chamba. Also, this would be an exception to the Mbum tradition that all their expansion was peaceful, that they did not wage war until the FulBe arrived. But the Tikar tradition says that Kimi was founded when Tumu asked the Tikar to cross to the left bank of the Mbam to protect them from the warring Kwanja. This leads to the second hypothesis, which, counter to the former version of events, concerns the manner in which the 'Tikar model' was diffused towards the Grassfields. The diffusion from a single source of small groups led by minor princes is implausible, their success in conquering unlikely. What you have is segmentary lineages adopting a migratory ideology and a style of fighting from some immi-

grants. But this is likely to have occurred over a long period of time and not from a single source. However, the Bârê-Chamba invasions of the second half of the eighteenth century can explain all these phenomena.

Bankim was the oldest and strongest dynasty founded by the first invaders from the north, midway between the Adamawa Plateau and the Grassfields. Before becoming a major trade route linking these poles, the Mbam-Kim corridor was the main route for successive invasions of Bârê-Chamba. It was these which in a half century exported the 'Tikar model' to the Grassfields, including the Bamun and the Bamiléké.

The motive for this expansion is to be found in the militarism of the Bârê-Chamba. They had military superiority in the form of horses, bows and poisoned arrows. They were accompanied by an important group of blacksmiths and thus could renew their arsenal as they went. However, as they assimilated elements of the groups they had conquered, their expansionist dynamism gradually diminished. Hence the Chamba invaders who formed the Bali kingdoms in the Bamenda region around 1830 are the last of a long series.

Thus Mbum migration is rejected as a key to explaining Tikar history. Simple chiefdoms were installed among the Ndómbì by Mbum elements before 1750. Only after this, in the period of the Chamba raids, did the Tikar dynasties of the Middle Mbam emerge.

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