



# WHEN THE PAST BECOMES THE FUTURE:

## Aspects of Cultural Revitalization Among the Gbaya in Bertoua, East-Cameroon

NDANGA NGNANTARE Dieudonne

Thesis Submitted for the partial fulfillment of  
the Degree of Master of Philosophy in Visual  
Culture Studies

FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES  
UNIVERSITY OF TROMSØ, NORWAY  
AUTUMN 2007



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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this work to the beloved memory of my father, M. Malem Blaise, gone before I had the opportunity to thank him for what he did for me.

I hope he can turn back and see how hard I am working to make sure that I do not disappoint him.

I also hope there is a place somewhere for such a brave person to rest in peace.



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Even if I had enough space and time to acknowledge everybody, I would certainly still forget someone. I therefore beg those whose names are not cited here to consider this as a manifestation of the forgetfulness of human mind.

Ndanga N. Dieudonne, Tromsø, November 2007.



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## ABSTRACT

This work is done in a context where groups and associations for culture revitalization flourish in Cameroon. By focussing on the actors, means and challenges of culture revival, I aim to describe the outcome of a process of de-tribalisation during which ethnic groups have had to relinquish their traditions in order to subscribe to modernisation as prescribed by states government and through pressure from western powers. The phenomenon studied here, the cultural revitalisation of the Gbaya in the group called the *Sirta*, works against this trend; tradition is made relevant and used in the modern context as a tool for respectability, social element for identity reconstruction and ethnic cohesion. By using different research techniques (participant observation, filming and interviewing) and combining historical background and empirical data, this study deals with the struggle for adaptation to a changing environment and the (re) invention of tradition. My thesis also highlights hindrances pertained in that process related to the scattering of knowledge and energy, misunderstanding and difference in life and educational background. By placing this debate in the global context of encounters between civilizations, this thesis reveals dilemmas that occur in people's lives, choices that are to be made, and mainly the state of confusion in which members of ethnic groups find themselves in Africa and more specifically in Cameroon. To conclude, the most important thing to discuss appears to be the dynamism and the fluctuation of culture that are demonstrated through revival, invention and manipulation of tradition. These are finally presented as results of historical confrontations and social challenges.

Key words: Cameroon, Gbaya, Cultural Revitalization, ethnicity.

## CHAPTER I. GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Bertoua is the Capital city of East Cameroon. It is situated between the longitudes 13°30' and 14° East and the latitudes 4° 30 and 5° North. Fifty years ago it was a group of small villages and hamlets under Bertoua, the main town. This place was newly occupied by Gbaya people who made their living from hunting and small scale farming, which favoured their scattering within the eastern part of Cameroon. With the birth of the Cameroon state, development of means of communication and the state policy of national integration, Bertoua is increasingly resembling a large cosmopolitan city with around 173 000 inhabitants according to unofficial estimates. It is an administrative centre, home to the seat of the state-appointed governor and all the provincial and departmental delegates of ministries. The economy is organised around timber companies, trade, transportation and agriculture. There is no important factory in Bertoua and everything is imported from other regions or abroad.

Generally, activities in Bertoua are divided according to ethnic groups or nationalities. French and Lebanese investors control timber companies and wood exportation. The Nigerian community controls hardware and second-hand cars sale. Commerce, grocery trade and investment that require big capital such as housing and insurance are mainly in Bamiléké's hands, while transport and clothes trade are run by Fulani and Hausa. Eton and Bamoun share control of agriculture and the sale of agricultural products. Administration and public offices are said to be fairly occupied by Cameroonians from every region. But from a common belief in Cameroon, this is merely in principle; in fact, Beti people from Southern Cameroon, the native region of the current Head of State hold most offices.<sup>1</sup> In this repartition, Gbaya people would have been presented as the landlords. But, faithful to a move already noticed with their northerner brothers in Meiganga,<sup>2</sup> they have been selling their plots in the urban area and withdraw to the peripheral zones. One could say that Gbaya were 'absent' from the city of Bertoua by the time I carried out my fieldwork. Their activities did not change a lot: most of Gbaya people are found in primary and secondary sectors of activities: subsistence agriculture, temporary positions in timber companies, small trade, motorbikes taxi drivers and other informal activities.

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<sup>1</sup> Anonymous, *Memorandum de la Majorite Kirdi du Grand Nord Cameroun*, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> Burnham, P., 1996, *The Politics of Cultural Difference in Northern Cameroon*, Smithsonian institution Press, Washington DC, p. 13.

On the contrary, the communities quoted above, especially those from other regions of Cameroon are organised in cultural associations with a traditional chief who is a representative of their paramount chief in Bertoua. Those associations have various purposes, one of which is the “tontine”, a kind of periodical financial contribution made for the sake of one member at a time. They also gather savings from their members and redistribute it on an annual basis. This makes it possible for them to ensure a closed flow of money among their members to finance their activities and maximise their profits.

Bertoua is the capital city of the division of Lom and Djerem, which encompasses other towns like Belabo, Diang and Garoua Boulai (See Appendix 1, map of Cameroon). On the political plan, Bertoua is under the domination of political elites from the neighbouring city of Belabo.<sup>3</sup> Since the 1970s with the emergence, on the national level as well as regional one, of politicians like Joseph Charles Doumba, Sabbal Lecco and nowadays Charles Sale, the representatives of the Division of Lom and Djerem have come from that city. Five out of six mayors of the city of Bertoua were from Belabo. Overall, the marginalisation of the Gbaya was very evident, since they had no voice in the flow of goods, in state administration or the political system.

Today, the Gbaya are organizing themselves in associations. The first one, the MOINAM, was created in 1993. In Bertoua, one of their aims is to return to a position they believe they had years ago in the region. My project will focus on the use of tradition and cultural identity that the Gbaya are using in their fight to access political and social resources.

## **1. Motivation**

I have chosen to work with the Gbaya people for several reasons. First they are one of the groups where the process of de-tribalisation<sup>4</sup> is easily observed; traditional knowledge has vanished and their customary institutions are no longer active, compared to some other ethnic groups in Cameroon. In addition, they occupy a somewhat marginalised position in the current political and economical setting,<sup>5</sup> leading to the process of reconstruction of their ethnic identity, combined with a quest for

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<sup>3</sup> Burnham, P., 1996, 140.

<sup>4</sup> A concept used by Abner Cohen (1969). By this he means a loss of relevance for ethnic identity and traditional knowledge on the political and economic agenda. I will elaborate on it in more details in chapter 4.

<sup>5</sup> Burnham, P., 1996, pp. 6, 84, 94.

respectability and visibility, the processes under question. Second, due to the fact that there is no university in the east province of Cameroon, monographs and other studies on the area are rare. By studying a phenomenon in this location, I am trying to contribute to a better understanding of the East, and add more to the general historiography of Cameroon and its people. Thirdly, I wanted to build on my previous research in that region during my previous education. Thus, I already had connections with the informants and know the place. I was borne there and I am a Gbaya myself, facts which I imagined would be an advantage. I remember when I was younger, we were mocked and labelled as “*kam*<sup>6</sup> eaters.” We were even ashamed to admit we were Gbaya. All this gave me the feeling that I had a privileged position to carry out this project, which will be discussed later.

## **2. Research problem**

For decades, members of ethnic groups were obliged to relinquish their customary lifestyle and contribute to the establishment of the unitary state. During this process, customs and ancient lifestyles faded out and people were divided by new value systems and institutions such as revealed religions,<sup>7</sup> formal schools, hospitals, the judiciary system, administration, political system, etc.<sup>8</sup> The turn of events of the early 1990s led to a redefinition of the focus of politics with respect to regionalisation. Local actors and communities were to reappear as privileged actors on the national arena. Traditions and customary institutions are now playing a central role in every sector of activities. For ethnic groups like the Gbaya, the problem was then to find a way back to establish a system and elite that could represent them in the new setting. One of the challenges was to bring people back together after being divided and scattered in various realm of activities. Hence my research question which is to know how and by what means they revitalize the Gbaya identity. This study focuses on the mechanism of cultural revival, the method used and the difficulties faced in this process.

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<sup>6</sup> *Kam*: Cassava porridge, see p. 19 for description.

<sup>7</sup> Revealed Religions are those faiths that are built upon a revelation from God, brought to mankind through His Prophets (Islam and Judaism) or His Own Son (Christianity). Their doctrine is usually written in a Revelation Book (Torah, Bible, and Koran.) In this case, I refer to Islam and Christianity.

<sup>8</sup> Waage, T., “Coping with Unpredictability.” *Navigating Youth Generating Adulthood, Social Becoming in an African Context*, Edited by Christiansen C. and Vigh H. E., Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, Uppsala, 2006, p. 67.



### **3. Research design**

I conducted my fieldwork between April and August 2006 in Bertoua. Unofficial sources calculate the population to be around 173 000 inhabitants. They are Gbaya, but also from almost all the other ethnic groups from Cameroon and neighbouring countries, namely Congo, Central African Republic, Chad and even Nigeria.

The data collecting methods I used were participant observation, direct interviewing and filming. Participant observation and filming were directed at my characters from the cultural revitalisation group, the *Sirta*. The direct interviewing was made with my other informants, Moussa and Bernard.

The sampling method was a judgemental sampling since there was no possibility for everyone to be selected. I chose my informants due to their Gbaya status, the relation of their activities to the cultural revitalisation process, and their knowledge of the Gbaya issue. That is how I chosen Bernard. He is a 63 years old Gbaya man who also helped me during my previous fieldwork. In my opinion he has an insightful perspective of Gbaya culture and the contemporary challenges they face. He also has the privilege of experiencing two totally different periods: the era of “our grand parents” as he put it himself while evocating the ancient Gbaya society and the current period. He therefore provides a comparative perspective between these two periods. My second informant is Moussa, 29. I chose him since for me he represents a detribalised Gbaya, educated at the University; he produces a radio program and is taking an apprenticeship as a Lawyer. He also had a comparative perspective on the Gbaya issue. I worked a lot with Moussa and Bernard even after fieldwork during interpretation of my data. They had key positions among the Gbaya in Bertoua and their analysis of my material usually gave fruitful insight. They act as interpreters for me and I was interested to see how their interpretations contradicted each other, revealing their background and how different people’s perspectives on the same phenomenon can be.

### **4. Cultural Revitalization**

The concept of culture revitalization implies a weakening, a disappearance of a given culture and an effort to resurrect it. Burnham<sup>9</sup> claims that culture is usually not

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<sup>9</sup> Burnham, P., 1996, pp. 164-165.

invented, but created on the basis of the cultural and traditional luggage people have. The cultural repertoire and the traditional knowledge are thus used as background to deal with new kind of problems and for new perspectives.

Furthermore, Anthony Wallace wrote that, when a society faces a period of trouble, people become nostalgic for an idealized past period when life was better and they define modalities of their actions in order to reach that idealistic vision. This is, the 'revitalization movement' which can be defined as a "deliberate, organized, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture."<sup>10</sup> This is a process observable in many parts of the world where people experience similar challenges. In order to give this work a clearer illustration of the phenomenon, I have decided to focus on the *Sirta*, a culture revitalization group in Bertoua.

### **5. Focus on the *Sirta* as main actors.**

My main group informant was the *Sirta*. *Sirta* is a word in Gbaya language meaning "expert hunter, warrior". In ancient Gbaya society, this was a secular group of initiated single men living apart from the community. They would share products of their hunting with others or exchange it for agricultural products. They would also join the community when threatened in order to unite their force and also during celebration. *Sirta* were also exceptional dancers and drummers. As "expert hunter" they have developed an acute technology with regards to hunting, orientation in forest, tracking animals, making weapons and setting traps. Due to these two last skills (their knowledge of war and hunting techniques, their skilfulness in arts) their group was one of the best concentrations of knowledge in the community. Therefore, a culture revival movement was created in 2003 with the same name, expressing a desire to emphasise traditional knowledge and the revitalization of its practice.<sup>11</sup>

The *Sirta* I am referring to in this work are therefore the *new Sirta*. Their members are both young men and girls and their leader is Emma, a 44 years old man who is assisted by Selbi who is 34 years old. The *Sirta* function as a formal association with a board and run their activities with the help of private funds. Their meetings are held periodically and the obligatory spoken language is Gbaya. Unlike the past *Sirta*, the new members are not initiated and enlisting is based on one's desire to join the group. They

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<sup>10</sup> Wallace, A. F. C., "Revitalization Movements." *American Anthropologist*, new series, vol. 58, n° 2, 1956, 265.

<sup>11</sup> Information given during a joint interview with Emma and Selbi, Bertoua, 10.05.2006.

are taught old Gbaya songs and dances, rituals and some customary practices. Their leaders, with the help of some elders in the Gbaya community, revive old rituals and traditions and some of them are already (re) accepted and performed at special occasions.

I have decided to focus on the *Sirta* for two reasons. My main concern was to study how tradition is brought back in a new context and utilized for contemporary purposes in the Gbaya community. The *Sirta* gave me the opportunity to observe the said phenomenon with a greater intensity. Their main concern was exactly what I wanted to observe, thus I only had to follow them and see what happened. The second point is that very early in the observation process I noticed that the *Sirta* were dealing with highly diverse people: both Gbaya people and outsiders. They were conducting various kinds of meetings, official ceremonies, sad and happy events. Thus, I hoped to have the opportunity to observe activities both within the internal Gbaya relationship, but also between the Gbaya and members of other ethnic groups.

## **6. Outline of the thesis**

Apart from the introductory chapter, this thesis has five chapters. The second chapter aims at presenting an historical background of the Gbaya people and the Cameroonian state policies on ethnicity. In the first part of this chapter, I want to present the Gbaya people, their origins and the migration they have been through, their political system and a short briefing on the Bertoua chieftaincy. The second part is dedicated to a summary of the changes that occurred in state policies. I want to show how, by introducing laws and policies at the national level, the state helped condition individuals' behaviour and the effect on the social and customary institutions. In this part I am trying to give a background to the study and explanations as to why the phenomenon studied happened specifically during this period of time.

In the second chapter, I will discuss the methodological aspect of the work. My main concerns are, on the one hand the data collecting methods, especially the filming and the role it played in providing a catalyst in the research process when it comes to showing marks of ethnicity in different centres of interest. On the other hand, I will focus on the trusting relationship developed between the researcher and the informants. Thirdly, I will discuss doing fieldwork at home: how is it possible to make a better profit of the advantages we have as insider during the field research and not becoming trapped by some of the aspects related to the same status. I will argue that being native to a research

field does not prevent one from falling into difficulties other might face, even if in different ways.

In the fourth chapter, I will present theories that I want to use in order to interpret the data. My research is about how ethnic identity is reconstructed and which kind of difficulties are faced in this process and what are the perspectives in such a process. I therefore need to use theories oriented toward ethnicity, specifically ethnic boundaries construction and maintenance, construction of communities and revival/invention of tradition. Authors whose work I will be dealing with are Fredrik Barth, Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, Abner Cohen and Anthony P. Cohen. As additional concepts to analyse the finality of the process under study I will use the notion of 'honour', 'respectability' and 'social recognition' as proposed by John Illife and Axel Honneth.

The data collected during fieldwork and their analysis will be presented first in the methodology chapter. There, I discuss the relevance of a native status in doing research at home and the evolution of the re-tribalisation process among the Gbaya. In the fifth chapter I have organized the data in three groups according to the topic addressed and their relation to the research question. The first subsection addresses the question of the mechanisms of reconstruction of tradition, resources materials and procedures. Here I will present the process of building a royal stretcher, the use of memories and story telling and how elders and youth cooperate in the process. In the second part, I am more concerned with the challenges faced in the process and strategies used in order to overcome them. Another group of data is presented around the making of a royal funeral and the role of different groups of actors participating in it. In the last subsection, I discuss survival of tradition in old forms of justice, what it implies on different levels of analysis. In that section, I will use the Gbaya trial by ordeal, performed for many years and kept a secret by Bernard.

The last chapter provides conclusions drawn from the analysis of my data. These include the use of remembrances in the process of reconstruction of ethnic identity, the hindrances faced in that process such as dispersion of traditional knowledge and what Barth called "cultural stuff" despite the survival of ethnic boundaries within years of de-tribalisation and damage caused by the construction of the unitary state. The third conclusion I draw concerns the use of tradition and its content for new purposes.



## CHAPTER II: BACKGROUND HISTORY

This chapter has two main foci. The first one is to present the background history of the people we are dealing with in the work, i.e. the Gbaya. My aim here is to give an understanding of the Gbaya people, especially the influence of their egalitarian organisation on their activities. I will also give an insight into their agricultural livelihood and the importance of hunting activities in their imagination. Then, I will present a brief history of the modern state of Cameroon since 1960 with the entry of the country into an international arena with a focus on state policies toward ethnic particularities and the building of the nation state. The goal is to point out the role of Cameroonian state policy in conditioning and restraining the expression of ethnic identity at the benefits of the establishment of the unitarian state; hence the relevance and the up rising of ethnic revival groups after the turn of events in the 1990s.

### I. THE GBAYA PEOPLE: ORIGINS, MIGRATIONS AND SETTLEMENT.

#### 1. Origins

The Gbaya ethnic group is a part of the *paleonigrades* group, on the subgroup of *inferior Sudanese*; in the same sub group we find the Mandja and the Ngbaka.<sup>12</sup> They are numbered around 1,2 million in Cameroon (unofficial sources), a little more in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Brazzaville Congo and Central African Republic. It is uncertain whether this widely scattered group has ever been united. They are rather divided into geographical subgroups, which are divided in turn into clans.<sup>13</sup> They have no written history (with exception of some monographs written by students at the University of Ngaoundéré, a Ph.D. thesis at the University of Yaoundé, works from Philip Burnham on the Gbaya *Yayuwe* in the Adamawa province and Bah Tierno)<sup>14</sup> and

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<sup>12</sup> Burnham, P., *Opportunity and constraint in a Savannah Society, the Gbaya of Meiganga*, Cameroon, London Academic Press, 1980.

<sup>13</sup> Burnham, P., *GBAYA*, the Rosen Publishing Group INC, New York, 1997.

<sup>14</sup> Burnham, P., Copet-Rougier, E., Noss, P., "Gbaya et Mkako: Contribution ethnolinguistique à l'histoire de l'Est-Cameroun." *Paidema*, n° 32 (1986), 87-128; Burnham, P., "Notes on Gbaya History." *Contribution de la recherche ethnolinguistique à l'histoire des civilisations du Cameroun*, Vol. 1, (1981) CNRS, 121-130; Bah, T., M., "Karnou et l'insurrection des Gbaya, Contribution à l'Etude de la résistance des peuples africains à la colonisation." *Afrika Zamani* n° 3 (1974) 105-161, Bateranzigo, L., "Les Gbaya et les Kaka, des origines a 1960", (Ph.D. Diss., University of Yaounde, 2005), posthumous thesis presented by Taguem Fah.

the oral sources telling the story of their origins hardly reach periods before 1800. Some oral sources indicate anyhow an original move from Southern Sudan to Western Central African Republic and Eastern Cameroon<sup>15</sup>. This information seems to be of some validity, because oral sources (mainly old informants) unanimously agree to indicate the same orientation of the migration of Gbaya people.

The Gbaya are divided into different groups. Some of these divisions relate to the boundaries of the states which have encompassed them. There are also around 12 subgroups: the Mbodomo, Kara, Lay, Dooka, Buli, Bofi, Biyanda, Yangere, Bokare, Yayuwe, Bokoto and *Bertoa*. While some of them have a geographical connotation (Gbaya *Bertoa*, mainly found in the Bertoua Subdivision, the Gbeya in Western Central African Republic or the Yayuwe mainly Northern Cameroonian) most of them are scattered and are likely to be found in different places. The Yangere and the Mbodomo, for instance, are found in the region of Bertoua, Batouri (Cameroon) Bouar and Berberati (Central African Republic).

## **2. Moved by hunting preferences to “Cameroon”**

The Gbaya are said to not have a strong hierarchical society, hence the flexibility of their social organisation and the ease with which they migrate. One of the driving forces of their movement was therefore the lack of strong central power which would orient them in one way or another. Adults were considered as equal to each other, and in a case of disagreement or serious internal conflict, the groups or families involved could simply pack and move to other places and found new villages. This was made easy by the availability of free lands around, and the nature of their cultivation; they usually have small farms and grow only short term vegetables.<sup>16</sup>

Dogo Badomo Beloko provides another clue in interpreting the scattering of Gbaya people and their migration. He believes that this can be understood as a consequence of hunting preferences. First, every clan had *totem* (in Gbaya language, “*Zim*”): an animal that was supposed to protect the clan members and grant them with luck during the hunting season. They were forbidden to kill that animal, or eat it if someone else killed it. The Totem was worshiped like a clan god and represented the ancestral spirit. The problem is that each clan had their own unique totem, thus making it difficult for them

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<sup>15</sup> Gosselin, G., *Travail et changement social en pays Gbaya*, Klincksieck, Paris, 1972, p. 20 and oral sources.

<sup>16</sup> Burnham, P., 1997, 16.

to stay in the same place. A *Zim* for a person **A** would not be the same for a person **B**, but likely to be **B**'s favourite game. With no coercive power to refrain the others from killing their Totem, clans had no choice but to move away and settle in different places.<sup>17</sup>

Another explanation can also be linked to hunting preferences. Beloko<sup>18</sup> thinks that it is possible to explain the migration of the Gbaya people according to their preferred game. Since there was no strong political power, people tended to do what they preferred. For instance, they had to follow seasonal migration of animals in the savannah or forest. The problem is that whenever the paths they were following bifurcated, they had to choose which way to follow. Having different preferences, those who wanted to hunt buffalo could see no point in following an antelope's cohort path with antelope eaters. They therefore followed their own way. And this could be reproduced *ad perpetuum* for any kind of disagreement on the path to follow, which way could be the most fruitful one, and so forth.

These are different ways to understand Gbaya geographical dispersion within central Africa and how some of them ended up in Bertoua in the East Province of Cameroon. It is possible to see how hunting a central activity in their life is. Together with farming, it was a characteristic of their ecological adaptation. The nature of these activities, coupled with their political organization made them a mobile society.

### 3. Settlement

The process of settlement of the Gbaya *Bertoa* in their current niche followed Hubert Deschamps theory on the egalitarian societies.<sup>19</sup> He argues that egalitarian or lineage based societies, where there was no strong political power, could stay in such a state for a long time, as long as they did not face any kind of danger. But as soon as they felt threatened by famine or tribal wars, they tended to elect a chief who embodied their hope and who was in charge of helping them out of the period of crisis. The chief was usually a military or a religious one.

From the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, a Fulani kingdom, the Sokoto was founded in Northern Nigeria and Cameroon by a Muslim leader, Ousman Dan Fodjo. The Eastern extremity of that kingdom in Cameroon was conquered by Modibo Adama and became

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<sup>17</sup> Beloko, D.-B., *L'Homme Gbaya, son Histoire, sa Culture*, EELC, Ngaoundéré, 1997.

<sup>18</sup> Idem, p. 16.

<sup>19</sup> Deschamps, H., *Histoire General de l'Afrique noire, de Madagascar et des Archipels de 1800 à nos jours*, Tome II, P.U.F., Paris, 1971, p. 193.



the Adamawa region. The main chiefdoms were the Lamidats of Garoua, Ngaoundere, Rey Bouba, among others.<sup>20</sup> Through the jihad, political and religious leaders of that kingdom endeavoured to convert all the neighbouring population into muslims, taking over the whole northern Cameroon and threatening the south. It is possible that the change in Gbaya political organization came from the threat of that Fulani jihad. Together with other small scales tribal wars occurring in the eastern part of Cameroon by that time, this must have made the transformation that Deschamps theorises. During approximately the last two decades before their settlement in Bertoua, the Gbaya *Bertoa* went through the same process. Although there is no record of previous Gbaya chiefdom, Gbaya *Bertoa* ran as a hierarchical society for almost a century in a chiefdom called Gamane/Gaimona. Their chiefs were first Ndiba from C.1840 to 1860, Ngangloulou from 1860 to 1870, Mbartoua the most famous and the eponymous chief of Bertoua from 1870 to 1903 and Ndiba Mbartoua from 1903 to 1919. All these chiefs had their court with notables, private and tribal armies and a royal palace. They ruled over Bertoua chiefdom as sovereigns and fought battles against neighbouring tribes in order to sustain their power and provide their trade with goods and slaves.<sup>21</sup>

Mbartoua gave the chieftaincy his own name thereafter moved to the French “Bertoua”. For approximately thirty-three years, he was involved in tribal wars, slavery and trade with the Lamidat of Ngaoundéré,<sup>22</sup> conquest and deportation of people from neighbouring villages. He transformed Bertoua/Gamane into an urban area integrated into the *Hausas trade flow*,<sup>23</sup> importing kola nuts, clothes, iron and salt from northern Cameroon, selling leather, ivory and slaves.

But such a reform did not last long. Threat of tribal wars progressively faded out, German, and the French colonisation came and the chieftaincy lost its standing. Unlike other groups in Cameroon, Gbaya *Bertoa* did not do anything to preserve their customary institution; perhaps because they were not originally organized as hierarchical society. They progressively went back to their original political organisation and lifestyle with hunting and small scale farming. Nowadays, Bertoua’s chief of district Aiba Ngare, grand son of Mbartoua, holds the customary power over the Gbaya *Bertoa*. He is consulted by a law court whenever issues related to customary

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<sup>20</sup> Koulandi J., “Rural Resettlement, Cotton Cultivation and Coping Strategies in the Benue River Basin, Northern Cameroon.” (Ph.D. diss., University of Tromso, 2006), pp.62-68.

<sup>21</sup> Ndanga N. D., “La Chefferie de Bertoua, Ca 1840-1947.” (B.A. diss., under the Supervision of Eldridge Mohammadou, University of Ngaoundéré, 2003).

<sup>22</sup> Bah, T. M., 1974, p.120

<sup>23</sup> Von Stein, The Expedition on Bertoua, fl. 6, 1903, Yaounde National Archives, Yaounde, p. 4.

law are addressed. He is also consulted by some of his subjects for arbitration of cases amongst them. But most of Gbaya people in Bertoua agree that he holds no real power.<sup>24</sup>

## **II. THE CAMEROONIAN STATE POLICY OF ETHNICITY: FROM BUILDING THE UNITARY STATE TO REGIONALISATION.**

### **1. Building an unitary state**

When the “Union des Populations du Cameroun”<sup>25</sup> (UPC) was created in 1948, their main goal was to overcome the French and British colonial rule over Cameroon, and to form an independent state. The nation’s long fight has always been directed against the colonizers. Thus the agenda of most political parties was liberation from colonial rulers. As the country slowly moved to independence, political disagreements and division emerged. In 1960, the French Cameroon alone had around 84 political parties.

Numerous small political parties were created with different agendas in various parts of Cameroon, some of which only differed by one word in their name, for instance the Cameroon National Congress and the Cameroon People’s Congress both created in 1953.<sup>26</sup>

When French Cameroon became independent in 1960, the Prime Minister and leader of the “Union Camerounaise”, Amadou Ahidjo, became the first President of Cameroon. The opposition and especially guerrilla from the UPC were still active, mainly in the Littoral, Centre and Western regions. Whilst not on the same scale as armed resistance in Indochina and Algeria, Takougan and Krieger believe that it was one of the most fierce political resistances in Sub Saharan Africa.<sup>27</sup> Some authors, such as Mongo Beti,<sup>28</sup> think that Ahidjo took the pretext of the UPC guerrilla to strengthen his power and support the myth of the Unitarian State. The official discourse of that time claimed that the extreme division and the threat of disintegration of the country dictated the turn of events. Nonetheless, it should be acknowledged that Cameroon underwent a strong

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<sup>24</sup> Interviews with informants who requested anonymity.

<sup>25</sup> UPC is the first Nationalistic political Party in Cameroon, they were the first to organize political opposition against colonial authorities; going so far as armed rebellion. Nowadays, the Movement still exists, though seriously weakened by internal conflicts.

<sup>26</sup> Ngoh, V., J., *Cameroon 1884-1985, A Hundred Years of History*, Navi-Group Publication, Yaoundé, 1987, pp. 283-284.

<sup>27</sup> Takougan, J., Krieger, M., *African State and society in the 1990s, Cameroon’s political crossroads*, Westview Press, Oxford, 1998, p.35.

<sup>28</sup> Beti, M., *Main Basse sur le Cameroun*, Editions des Peuples Noirs, Rouen, 1984.

process of homogenisation at that time. Therefore, books were published to acknowledge success of the Federal Government in uniting Cameroon.<sup>29</sup>

British Cameroon became independent in October 1961 and the two Cameroons were reunified. Guerrilla from the UPC became progressively less powerful with the loss of their last charismatic leaders, Ruben Um Nyobe in 1958 and Felix Moumie in Switzerland in 1960.<sup>30</sup> Comforted with the total expulsion of violent political opposition, Ahidjo attacked the political parties. What is of interest here is that, as he fought political opposition, he also repressed ethnic particularities.

On September 1, 1966 a “Unified Party” was created, named the Cameroon National Union, CNU. Every political leader who accepted the call to join that party was appointed in the Party or inside the State system. Others were ignored or presented as anti patriots, enemies of the state. Henceforth, in the name of national unity, the multiparty system was banned and particular associations with political, regional, tribal or religious purpose were forbidden throughout the country. Everything was discussed inside the CNU and only two religions were allowed, namely Christianity (catholic and protestant churches) and Islam.

For more than 25 years, differences were banned and people were encouraged to think more as Cameroonian than as members of ethnic groups. As the Current President put it in one of his speeches: “This unity, which is fraught with diversity and complementary, solidarity and faith in a common destiny, transcends all forms of particularities, especially geographical, historical, linguistic, tribal and religious, making Cameroon a modern and powerful state, [...] This means that Cameroonians are first of all Cameroonians, before being Bamiléké, Ewondo, Fulbe, Bassa, Bulu, Douala, Bakweri, Gbaya, Massa or Maka...”<sup>31</sup>

Cultural events were merely suppressed, such as “Ngondo”, the Sawa annual festival which was banned until 1991 and “Feo Kague” the Toupouri Traditional Feast of the cock which was banned until 1997. The *Labi*, a Gbaya initiation ritual was banned and has never resumed. Although the Gbaya people relinquished their traditional activities, they remained reluctant to engage in new institutions. In Bertoua, they were among the latest in the schooling process.

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<sup>29</sup> For instance Levine, V., 1963, *The Cameroon Federal Republic* and Johnson, W., R., *The Cameroon Federation: Political integration in a fragmentary Society* both cited by Takougan, *ibid*.

<sup>30</sup> Beti, M., 1984, p. 67.

<sup>31</sup> Paul Biya, speech delivered on September 14, 1983 at the extraordinary Congress of CNU, translated and cited by Takougan, J., 1998, p. 94. A speech on the same vein was delivered in 1962 in Ebolowa by Amadou Ahidjo during a CNU Congress.

Traditional chieftaincies, institutions in charge of protecting customs were deprived of their substances and their autonomy was transferred to the central government who took charge of appointing the customary leaders based on their acceptance of State authority and its policy. Customary leaders were more administrative co-workers than custodians of local traditions. After the “tradition washing” job made by colonizers in order to put local habits in accordance with their own perception of ‘civilization’,<sup>32</sup> another tradition washing was made in order to neutralise local habits and make them adhere to Unitarian State policy. It was therefore usual to see some traditional authorities appointed in State functions and vice-versa<sup>33</sup>. While chieftaincies in the North and West kept some residue of power that has since grown, Gbaya chiefs were definitely wiped out. Such a state of affair lasted until the 1990s when elements on the internal as well as the international plans forced the system to alter from its former position.

## **2. Multiparty system, regionalisation and local communities**

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, a strong political stream emanating from Eastern Europe affected several countries in Africa. The collapse of communist power and popular democracy led to the establishment of Liberal Democracy as a model all over the world. A conference held at La Baule in France by French President François Mitterrand confirmed the tendency. Democratization was presented as a key condition in developing countries if they were willing to keep receiving aid from western countries. On the local level, demand for democracy became stronger and more persistent from population. Therefore, governments were obliged to compromise and give some space for political freedom.

In Cameroon, the first move was in late 1990. Under pressure on an international level coupled by popular disenchantment that was manifested through strikes in the streets, the government published a law on freedom of association and freedom of expression. Political, cultural and regional associations were rehabilitated under the condition of registering at the ministry of territorial administration. Increasingly, festivals, religious and cultural rituals invaded public arenas. What was previously forbidden or performed secretly came out in public places.

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<sup>32</sup> “Tradition washing” is a concept used by Mahmood Mamdani to describe a process whereby, using a ‘repugnancy clause’, colonizers modified customs and traditions when they felt that public order or morality were attacked, or when those customs were contrary to civilization. See Mamdani, M., *Citizens and Subjects*, Princeton University press, New Jersey, 1996, p. 115.

<sup>33</sup> Idem and Bayart, 1993, p. 171.

In 1996, the national assembly voted a new Constitution. One of the main innovations in that new law was regionalisation which was added to the process of democratization. That law prescribes the establishment of regional parliaments and management of resources by local communities. Whilst it is not yet effective, it demonstrates current orientations in contemporary politics in Cameroon. First, it has oriented activities led by political leaders to their own region, since they are elected on a regional basis to the parliament, and soon to the senate and the regional council. Secondly, by creating such an atmosphere, the law has strengthened and boosted the tendency of ethnic groups to gather and revive their cultural identities. Their main objective is to manifest prominence in the public arena, an arena characterized by around 235 listed ethnic groups and limited resources controlled by the state government.

A new orientation was therefore adopted. By acknowledging regional and ethnic differences, the state government gave rise to the emergence of ethnic particularities and struggles for recognition. My fieldwork was conducted approximately sixteen years since the beginning of this political and cultural shift. Three presidential elections, three legislative elections and three communal elections have taken place. Effects of the seminal acts implemented a decade ago were still perceivable.

In this chapter, I hope to have presented the Gbaya people, their livelihood and political organisation. This should provide a foundation for understanding my study. The second stage of this chapter gives background information and context to the movement under study. It is understood here that interlocutors of Gbaya people are at the same time the state system (judge and arbiter of the political setting) and other ethnic groups (competitors or partners on the political and social arena). Furthermore, my concern in this chapter was to present historical developments that have led to the repression of ethnic particularities, a process that favoured the scatter of traditional knowledge and customs in some regions such as Bertoua.

## CHAPTER III. METHODOLOGY

During a research process, there are several exchange flows created, among which is the one between researchers and informants. At the beginning of the project, I wanted to study the use of traditional knowledge in different arena. With the *Sirta* I was to observe the revival and the use of tradition. At the same time in Bertoua II, a suburb in the south of Bertoua, I wanted to work with a group of merchant women whose work was based on Gbaya culinary knowledge. As a background element, I had my status as a native of the place. Thus, in this chapter I want to discuss how this may have inflected upon my fieldwork in particular, the way it shaped my relationship both with the *Sirta* and the women of Bertoua II and consequently the data I have gathered. Most important to my study, however, are the trusting relationships I have built with some informants. Furthermore, the discussion I am about to present here will enable me to evaluate the evolution of the re-tribalisation process among the Gbaya in Bertoua.

### I. NATIVE Vs FOREIGNER?

“If self-knowledge is the most difficult to gain, an anthropology of one’s people is the most arduous, but also the most valuable achievement of a fieldworker.”<sup>34</sup> With this sentence anthropological fieldwork at home was first evoked by Malinowski. But what are the methodological difficulties and benefits of this? Moreover, on an epistemological level, what are the potential consequences of implicit value accorded to work produced by insiders and how does one negotiate such a situation? These are questions I will now address in relation to my fieldwork experience.

#### 1. What do you want, really?

I was born and raised in Bertoua with Gbaya origins. I speak an approximate Gbaya language due to my long stay away from Bertoua, first in Ngaoundéré and then in Norway. In spite of that ‘language problem’, I consider myself and accepted as a member of the local community. This close connection assisted my search for contacts.

When I was introduced to the *Sirta* group, I was recognised as Augustin’s cousin, one of their members and it helped me to become accepted. I told them that I was doing a study

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<sup>34</sup> Malinowski, B., 1939, quoted by Peirano, M. G. S., “When Anthropology is at home: the different contexts of a single discipline.” *Annual review of Anthropology*, n° 27 (1998) p. 106.

on the revival of Gbaya culture in the form of a thesis and a documentary film. Immediately a middle-aged man among them took the floor and spoke for around three minutes. He first expressed his satisfaction about seeing how educated some of “our sons” can be, congratulated me for my interest for Gbaya culture and asked the others to give me any kind of help I might need, not forgetting to mention how available he already was to help me. He ended his speech by saying that since I had come so far, it was an opportunity for me to spread our tradition and thus become a “flag bearer” for the Gbaya community of Bertoua. Moreover, when I screened my film to an audience of lecturers both from our university in Tromsø and from Mali, Professor Holtedahl said that she could feel the pain of my people in my voice over. Here, my status as an insider provided an important element of authority and empathy in the comments I have given in the film.

Kim<sup>35</sup> argues that contact with other cultures before studying one’s own is useful. It strengthens reflexivity and develops the aptitude to look at one’s own culture more critically. Added to such a reflection, I have been trained never to take for granted knowledge and information gained in the field. Burdened by such a background and my concern for being as ‘neutral’ and ‘objective’ as possible, I sometimes asked question to which answers would appear as trivial for the common Gbaya people. Several time, I felt that I “broke the chemistry” between the *Sirta* and myself. Once, I asked one of them to present their tools and their uses to me. It was a range of arrows of various size, shields and drums. He looked at me, hesitated and started talking. I could see that he was acting as if he was not talking to me and his speech was exaggerated. Apparently, he couldn’t believe that I did not know what these objects were; his reaction implies that I was either fooling him or testing his knowledge. This was bad for our relationship and sometimes I could see that other informants lost trust in my project, even asking themselves “what does he want, really?” In their eyes, I was supposed to do something serious and help them carry out their work and I was there, asking irrelevant questions and wasting their time. I imagine a foreign researcher could have been luckier than me in such circumstances because instead of feeling they were wasting their time, they would have certainly been proud to teach their custom to an outsider, since his apparent ignorance of Gbaya culture would have been more understandable for them than mine.

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<sup>35</sup> Kim, C. S., “Can an Anthropologist go home again?” *American Anthropologist*, New series, vol. 89, n° 4, 1987, p. 944.

## 2. Returning home?

The “flag bearer” story tells a lot about challenges faced while doing research in one’s home place and expectations people have on my project. Many informants believed that since we belong to the same community, I would necessarily praise and support their case in my writings. The contrary could be taken as an act of betrayal from the researcher toward his own community. Thus, my study may always be seen in this light, making me the key element of a discussion about my work, and not the content of the work itself. Due to this ethical and moral dilemma, I have come to believe that a foreign researcher is freer and has a better “marge de manoeuvre” than a native one.

In her article, Strathern<sup>36</sup> states that one of the common assumptions on anthropology at home is that, anthropologists on familiar terrain are supposed to reach a greater understanding than elsewhere because they do not have to face language problems or cultural barriers. Thus, following Ruby’s argument, women should make films about women, gays about gays, and so on.<sup>37</sup> By looking for this so called effectiveness everyone would end up doing fieldwork in their own home place, hence the reaction of Narayan,<sup>38</sup> protesting: “do not anthropologists who engage sensitively in long term fieldwork also deserve respect from their professional colleagues as partial insiders who have through time become bicultural?” Examples to illustrate this are many.

Moreover, by acknowledging the native researchers a “de facto” legitimacy to study their culture, by accepting their work as implicitly authentic, “the result of this attitude is to uncritically accept anything they produce as being the truth about their culture.”<sup>39</sup> Yet, as Narayan pertinently observed, “even the most experienced of native anthropologist can’t know everything about his own society.”<sup>40</sup>

My point therefore is that, unless we want to produce biased knowledge and participate in the creation of traditions and myths about people,<sup>41</sup> we should respect the work of both native and foreign researchers. As I have showed here, during my fieldwork, my Gbaya identity helped open some doors, whilst simultaneously closing others, a similar experience to what a foreign researcher in Bertoua or elsewhere might have had. The most

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<sup>36</sup> Strathern, M., “The limits of auto-Anthropology.” Jackson, A., (ed.), *Anthropology at Home*, Tavistock Publications, London and New York, 1987, 16-37.

<sup>37</sup> Ruby, J., “Speaking for, Speaking about, Speaking with or Speaking alongside.” *Picturing Culture. Exploring of film and Anthropology*. University of Chicago Press, London (2000), p. 214.

<sup>38</sup> Narayan, K., “How Native is a ‘Native’ Anthropologist?” *American Anthropologist*, no 95 (1993).

<sup>39</sup> Ruby, J., 2000, p. 218.

<sup>40</sup> Narayan, K., 2000, p. 678.

<sup>41</sup> Hanson, A., “The Making of the Maori: Culture Invention and its logic.” *American Anthropologist*, New series, vol. 91, n° 4 (1989) p. 895.



important element of a fieldwork, as Altern and Holtedahl have said, is the relationships the researcher manages to develop within the research community.<sup>42</sup>

## II. FERTILE FAILURES.

The Gbaya people have adopted cassava (casava, yuca or manioc - *Manihot esculenta* -) as their main dish. They eat its leaves and also its tuberous roots. Those roots are transformed in various ways, among which the cassava porridge called *Kam* in Gbaya language. It is the main dish and is eaten almost all the time. It is so rooted in Gbaya habits that when a Gbaya invite you for a meal, the formula is: “*Mè tè nyon Kam!*” (Come and eat *Kam!*) Cassava is also transformed into a sort of cake enveloped in big leaves and can be conserved for days. Some Gbaya women commercialise it. Besides from my concern for culture revival, I wanted to see how traditional knowledge, for instance food, is used as a part of a battle in the up surging commercial landscape in Bertoua. I met a group of three women in Bertoua II, a peripheral quarter in the southern part of the city. They cook cassava cake and sell it in the market approximately three times a week. My fieldwork assistant and I explained to them what we were doing, for which purpose and why we would like to work with them. I told them later on, we would film them and make a documentary film about their activities. In a way, it was a kind of oral version of the *letter of information and consent*. They looked at each other and agreed.

Some days after I came back, sat down in their courtyard and had a quiet talk with Andre, one of the husbands. I had a still photo camera and was taking some pictures of their compound. The first point that struck my attention was that I had the feeling that their activities were frozen. Gbaya people have their meal warm, usually made of *Kam* and some meat sauce or vegetable. They have it any time during the day, for breakfast, lunch, dinner. Food is served in two bowls, a big one for the porridge and a smaller one for the sauce. I saw that Andre’s wife (one of the women I wanted to work with) was preparing a meal; she served it, covered the two bowls and put them aside. Only two things could explain this: either they were expecting someone else to come or they were waiting for someone to leave. It was not the first scenario since people usually wait until the guest arrives and then, they make the *Kam*, which is an easy and quick dish. Thus, I understood that they were waiting for me to leave since my presence was bothering them. There is no

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<sup>42</sup> Ingern Altern and Lisbeth Holtedahl, “Knowledge about us and others”. *Ngaoundere Anthropos, Revue de Sciences Sociales*, Vol. 5 (2000), pp. 33-70.

need to emphasise here that I knew I was undesirable due to my Gbaya education. Their actions hastened their tacit attitude towards me and I duly left.

The next day, we were supposed to go to their farm and see the whole process of making the cassava cake from the extraction of cassava roots. Two of the ladies were sitting in front of their house and the third one was absent. They told me that they cancelled their trip to farm that day and we should reschedule for another day. Another time we arranged to meet at the market place; I went there and waited in vain for an hour. Similar occurrences happened for almost a month. I would always turn up to their appointments, but they would always have a reason for cancelling our plans or not turning up.

### **1. Trust above all.**

Holliday says that during the research process, researchers are also objects of their informants' observation.<sup>43</sup> Informants constantly negotiate the appropriate way to deal with the newcomer in their home and, if it becomes inconvenient they might become reluctant. Commenting on the fieldwork story of a female researcher in an Arabic school in Egypt, Holliday shows how her acceptance was granted only after the informants saw in her a mother and a wife and less a researcher. In my case, I suspect the women of Bertoua II felt things were unnatural for them. Although I told them I was Gbaya and spoke the language with them, they could not figure out how to deal with me. I told them things that they might not have understood and that I was not working with any television channel but that I still wanted to film them. Ultimately I had come from Europe, which was awkward for them. Thus they could not relate to me as a fellow Gbaya nor could they understand the notion of research applied to them.

The question one could ask here is why did this happen with the women at Bertoua II and not with others, the *Sirta* for example? In my opinion, this is a manifestation of a typical relationship between researcher and informants, especially in visual anthropology. The two entities are unknown to each other and meet in the context of a research run by one of them. The researcher owns the research project and bears the responsibility of the use of the collected materials and the way it is presented in the resulting work. Informants can participate in the selection of the visual material; but Ruby<sup>44</sup> has demonstrated the ineffectiveness of such procedures, maintaining that he is "uncertain whether even media

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<sup>43</sup> Holliday, A., 2003, p.162. See also Arntsen and Holtedahl, , Visualizing Situatedness – The role of the Audience/Reader in Knowledge Production, paper presented at Challenging Situatedness – Gender, culture and knowledge, Tromsø, 2002, p. 4.

<sup>44</sup> Ruby, J., 2000, p. 206.

sophisticates are competent to evaluate documentaries about themselves.” This means that the paramount responsibility lies on the researcher’s shoulder. Thus, informants usually feel how fragile they are in the research process<sup>45</sup> since the way they will be represented in the final work relies on the researcher her/himself. Their involvement in the research process depends neither on the honesty of the researcher, their interest in the project (if any at all), nor on whether researcher is a native or not. From what I saw during the research process, the informants’ participation in a visual anthropology research process relies on their confidence in the researcher. It is due to trust that they allow the researcher to enter into their lives and film; that they allow her or him to talk about them and their lives in the knowledge that this material will be published and broadcast. It is because they think the researcher is trustworthy that, despite that they might not know how he or she will use the data, edit the video and present them to the world, they accept to participate. The women of Bertoua II did not find the proper status to give me, they did not figure out how they would deal with me, thus they couldn’t trust me.

## 2. Nothing to show

When comparing the “flag bearer” story with the Bertoua II one, I would say that with the *Sirta* I already had an established relationship. But I still wondered why it is that they accepted me so quickly and allowed me to film from the first day, while at Bertoua II I had no success. The first element to take into consideration in order to answer this question is that at Bertoua II, I was dealing with people in their private life. With the *Sirta* I was dealing with a group, on a community level. The *Sirta* felt at ease showing what they were doing for the public’s sake and they would not mind receiving more publicity. The difference is that at Bertoua II they had to trust me not to harm them or misuse data concerning them; with the *Sirta*, they had to trust me being able to make a film on them, spread Gbaya culture and being their “flag bearer”. Indeed, none of the *Sirta* members accepted to be filmed in their private lives or elsewhere other than with the *Sirta* Group. Only Emma allowed me to film him at his factory.

Whenever I talked to my informants, I mentioned my interest in seeing how traditional knowledge is revived and used. It was an interesting opportunity for those who had something to display, for instance Emma and the *Sirta* Group. As I tried to dig deeper into peoples’ lives, I sensed that I ran into difficulties. My failure in filming the women at

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<sup>45</sup> Artsen B. and Holtedahl L., 2002, p. 11.

Bertoua II stands as a proof. But one can also explain this in different ways. In my opinion, the most interesting one is that since I was filming, people felt that they should show things that were relevant for me. This is why I think that the camera was playing a role of a catalyst. It drew people's attention to the relevance of what they could show and how it might be interpreted. In this case, they thought they could not display traditional knowledge and Gbaya culture in their private lives and they avoided allowing me in. This could explain why the *Sirta* group members let me film them during rehearsals, but would be reluctant when I asked to follow them home. In a sense, I would say that, by denying cooperating with me, the women of Bertoua II actually oriented me towards a more fruitful research setting, implicitly telling me "there is nothing to see here."

My point is that, the de-tribalisation process has gone deep enough into people's lifestyle so that it would be difficult to differentiate a Gbaya person to another tribesman. Cohen wrote that de-tribalisation was caused by historical challenges (slavery, colonization) or new values system and social nuisance that have cut across ethnic boundaries and made them less relevant.<sup>46</sup> Practically, apart from situations where people gather and explicitly support the revival of their culture, it is difficult to see signs of their ethnicity in their private life. One would rather see hints of economic and social status (their wealth, class, poor, marital status or religion) that have less to do with their ethnicity and are observable with any other tribesman. At the end, one could also argue that the process of re-tribalisation that the Gbaya people are engaged in is still at an early stage. It has not yet pervaded all aspects of people's lives, which is why some parts of it can be proudly displayed, and others not.

My research aim is to study the mechanisms and challenges pertained in the process of culture revitalisation in the case of the Gbaya in Bertoua. In this chapter, with developments related to methodological approaches used in the field, it is possible to present some clues to understand the current situation of Gbaya people. On an intimate level, one can observe a lifestyle almost empty of traditional knowledge and ethnic identity. In that instance, one can observe that they are somehow assimilated. Except from an organisational level where they meet and make conscious efforts in order to perform customary practices, people are less differentiated in their private life. I also observed that my status as a native did not help me in a special way and protect me from failures. I

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<sup>46</sup> Cohen, A., *Custom and Politics in Urban Africa*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1969.

came to believe that the ability of a researcher to establish trusting relationship with the informants is beyond his status as a native or foreigner.

## CHAPTER IV: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this study my main concern is to present some activities among the Gbaya people and mechanisms of identity reconstruction, boundary maintenance and community distinctiveness. On a general level, I interpret contemporary cultural practice amongst Gbaya people as a search for elements that would distinguish them from others in order to affirm their distinctiveness, thus resisting assimilation. They are examining their past, looking for symbols that can reunify their community and strengthen the sense of Gbaya group membership. That is why on a theoretical approach, in order to analyse this situation and interpret efficiently the empirical material I have collected, some specific theories on ethnicity, ethnic boundaries and boundary maintenance, tradition invention and community membership should be used. The first theory is ethnic groups and boundaries, boundary maintenance by Fredrik Barth.<sup>47</sup> The second one is on the work of Cultural revitalization Movements and the use and manipulation of Tradition; this will be discussed in *The Invention of Tradition*.<sup>48</sup> I will then discuss Abner Cohen's de/re-tribalisation,<sup>49</sup> which I want to use in conjunction with the symbolic construction of Community.<sup>50</sup> At the end of the Chapter, I will present a short discussion of 'honour', 'respectability' and 'recognition'.

### I. THE THEORY OF ETHNIC BOUNDARIES AND BOUNDARIES MAINTENANCE

One of the most influential, and doubtlessly the most quoted works on ethnicity is the Introduction to Barth's *Ethnic groups and Boundaries*, a collection of essays first published in 1969.<sup>51</sup> Barth's objective is to stress social organisation and structures enclosing culture and institutional forms. Barth believes that because ethnic groups are made of ascribed stati, their very sustainability relies on the maintenance of their boundaries. This is due to the fact that the other elements, i.e. cultural features change according to time, context and situations faced at a given moment by a group. Ethnic

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<sup>47</sup> Barth, F., (ed), "Introduction." *Ethnic groups and Boundaries, the Social Organisation of Culture Difference*, Pensumtjeneste, Oslo, 1969.

<sup>48</sup> Hobsbawm, E. and Ranger, T., *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983.

<sup>49</sup> Cohen, A., *Custom and Politics in Urban Africa*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1969.

<sup>50</sup> Cohen, A. P., *The Symbolic Construction of a Community*, Routledge, London, 1985.

<sup>51</sup> Barth, F., 1969, pp. 9-38.

groups should thus be defined according to the drawing of their boundaries versus others, not to the cultural stuff enclosed within those boundaries.

By directing the focus to boundaries and dichotomisation between “us” and “them”, Barth implies that ethnicity should be seen as an aspect of relationship between ethnic groups and not as a property of a person or a group<sup>52</sup>. On the structural functionalist perspective of Radcliff-Brown, one could say that Barth’s ethnic boundaries are elements that support and maintain the group, preventing it from vanishing.

In practical terms, this theory suggests that ethnic affiliation, by governing all statuses, dictates what might be allowed or forbidden for persons who belong to a given ethnic identity, underlining their difference from the ‘others’ (dichotomization). A slide is however observable between the ideal type of behaviour and what is actually seen (variation). Revisions occur, particularly when the categorization becomes irrelevant or unrewarding, giving ethnic status and ethnic identity, first a dynamic aspect, but also a situational understanding. That is how one can understand the attitude of the women of Bertoua II; they did not see their activities as belonging to either side of the boundaries any longer. My interest in the cassava porridge appeared irrelevant for them since they knew that other people do the same and thus it was not an adequate marker of Gbaya identity.

At the end, Barth claims that inter ethnic relationships are divided into two, namely sectors of articulation and separation. He states that “stable inter-ethnic relations presuppose such a structuring of interaction: a set of prescription governing situations of contact, and allowing for articulation in some sectors or domains of activity, and a set of proscription on social situations preventing inter-ethnic interaction in other sectors, and thus insulating parts of the cultures from confrontation and modification.” Stability and equilibrium of such interaction resides on a balance between sectors of articulation and sectors of separation. A wider sector of articulation would imply a tendency to assimilation or a weakening of ethnic boundaries. In the case under study, the sector of separation content features that are presented as typically Gbaya. As those items and symbols tended to disappear, they had to recreate new ones such as the royal stretcher and funerals.

Barth has been both praised and criticised for his theory. On the one hand, some think that the differentiation made between ethnic boundaries and cultural stuffs in order to

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<sup>52</sup> Eriksen, T. H., *Small Places, Large Issues, An Introduction To Social And Cultural Anthropology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Pluto Press, London, 2001, p.263.

define ethnic relationships was definitely a key move. “The shift from a static to an interactional approach was accomplished by differentiating the notion of ethnicity from that of culture. Barth presented ethnicity or ethnic identity as an aspect of social organization, not of culture” say Vermmeulen and Govers.<sup>53</sup> Eriksen reinforces Barth’s theory, stating “it is through contact with others that we discover who we are, and an isolated ethnic group may therefore be compared with the sound of one hand clapping.”<sup>54</sup> This point deepens the situational and interactional aspect of Barth’s theory of ethnicity.

This theory is useful for my work for it enables me to analyse the efforts made by Gbaya people under the spotlight of boundary consolidation between them and other ethnic groups. Their struggle can therefore be presented as an effort to reach a balance between sectors of articulation and separation. As I will show later in my study, negotiations among Gbaya people do not include Gbaya identity, but rather the content of that identity or the cultural stuffs enclosed within its boundaries, consolidating the view of Barth on the prevalence of ethnic boundaries in ethnic interactions, and the variation of cultural stuffs.

## II. INVENTED TRADITIONS

Tradition, from the Latin word “*traditio*” means “to hand down” or to “hand over”. By this word, we usually refer to rituals, values and symbols handed down from one generation to another. The common idea is that tradition is supposed to represent ‘ancient’ thought and beliefs. In their book from 1983, Hobsbawm and Ranger<sup>55</sup> revised our understanding, suggesting that “Traditions which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented.”<sup>56</sup> By this, they mean at the same time a process within which old traditions are used for new purposes, new traditions invented on the basis of old ones and also the invention of an alleged historical continuity in a given community. According to the authors of this book, objects and practices are also used on the same vein, usually “liberated for full symbolic and ritual use when no longer fettered by practical use”. Objects used in a pragmatic way remain ordinary until their use diminishes. Therefore, they become items for parade and adopt more symbolic

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<sup>53</sup> Vermmeulen and Govers (1994) quoted by Jenkins, R., *Rethinking Ethnicity*, Sage, London, 1997, p.19.

<sup>54</sup> Eriksen, T. H., 2001, 263.

<sup>55</sup> Hobsbawm, E. and Ranger T., 1983.

<sup>56</sup> Idem, p. 1.



significance. Clothes and ritual dances can be cited as example of this point. The same is said about the context suitable for such a process. When glory of customary institutions has faded, it is time for tradition inventors to bring out new practices. The authors talking about those new practices claim that: “yet it may be suggested that where they are invented, it is often not because old ways are no longer available or viable, but because they are deliberately not used or adapted”. Due to the loss of relevance of their social institutions, the Gbaya people felt a need to bring back and adapt their customs.

Further, the context of Colonial Africa,<sup>57</sup> struggles for recognition amongst indigenous people and a reconstruction of their history<sup>58</sup> are similar occasions in which both insiders and outsiders use tradition, or what is presented as tradition, for different purposes.

The authors think that inventing tradition is a process of formalisation and ritualization within which practice is presented as genuine, harmonized and ritualized. Through repetition, actors involved in the process hope to get it established and respected as a custom. But there are still differences between these invented traditions and old ones, the authors claim. The first one is that old traditions were specific and strongly embedded with social practices, invented traditions are quite unspecific, imprecise in the values, rights and obligations they are trying to inculcate. The second differentiation is made by Terence Ranger and restated in a book published in 1993.<sup>59</sup> He points out the flexibility of old traditions and rigidity of new ones. While old traditions are more flexible and ready to adopt in day-to-day life, invented tradition, because they tend to be written and routinized, are more uncompromising.<sup>60</sup> This is the main difference I will present between the *Sirta* and Bernard. As the *Sirta* are in the logic of the (re) invention of tradition while Bernard keeps seeing it as a part of daily life free of any kind of constraint.

I use this theory in order to understand mechanisms of culture revival. It has proved to be efficient to underline the importance of some items that are given symbolic meaning within my empirical data, such as the royal stretcher. It is also an important tool for analysing and systematizing negotiations among Gbaya people involved in the process

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<sup>57</sup> Ranger, T., 1983, “The invention of tradition in Colonial Africa.” Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983.

<sup>58</sup> Hanson, A., “The Making of the Maori: Culture invention and its logic.” *American Anthropologist*, vol. 91, n° 4 (1989), 890-902.

<sup>59</sup> Ranger, T., *The invention of Tradition revisited: the case of colonial Africa*, 1993.

<sup>60</sup> Quoted by Ole B. Rekdal, “The invention by tradition: creativity and change among the Iraqw of Northern Tanzania.” (Ph.D. diss., University of Bergen, 1999)

and which meaning should be given to such exchanges, for instance the negotiations during the royal funerals.

### **III. BOUNDARY MAINTENANCE AND THE SYMBOLIC CONSTRUCTION OF COMMUNITIES**

In a world where interactions between different groups become more and more intense, where social identity multiply and the area of interaction between individuals becomes thinner, Anthony Cohen<sup>61</sup> writes that communities are actually a symbolic construct that resides in peoples' minds and expressed through symbols. His theory lies in accordance with Barth's 'Ethnic groups and Boundaries' in as much as it focuses on the dichotomisation process between a groups' members and others, and the flow of meanings that goes on both ways across the boundaries.

Anthony Cohen writes that considering the infertility of the conception of a community as a structure, it seems to be necessary to approach it from the symbolic point of vantage. Therefore, because members of a given community feel themselves under threat through assimilation or cultural disappearance, or just because others have been doing so, they manipulate symbols of that community in order to preserve its consciousness. In that sense, his main argument is that community is a repository of meaning and signs that are symbolic markers distinguishing it from the other communities. These symbols can actively be utilized and it is observable in Bertoua today: an arrow given to a governor renewed the pride in Gbaya people and strengthened their sense of being from that group.

Symbols used on this way can be rules, languages, rituals, etc. As the rituals are concerned, Cohen thinks that they are an important means through which people experience community as it highlights the sense of belonging and their commonality. Nevertheless, he specifies that, although members of the same community might not give the same meaning to a symbol, they do share the same body of symbols and feel that they are more similar among themselves than with members of other communities. In that sense, one could add that, although they acknowledge their differences, groups belonging to the same area would feel they are more alike than they are with members of other areas. For instance Gbaya and Fulani would differentiate inside Cameroonian

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<sup>61</sup> Cohen, A. P., 1985.

borders, but would feel more in solidarity with each other in front of someone from another country. This is the way Cohen explains the compatibility of the two Durkheimian conceptions of society: the mechanic solidarity and the organic one.

Just as Barth stresses the interactional aspect, and Hobsbawm and Ranger stress the symbolisation of practices and objects, Cohen stresses that the symbolic bases of communities are strengthened when structural bases of boundaries become blurred. All these theories acknowledge the presence of two or more groups in interaction as a condition for the expression of ethnicity, invention of tradition or simply construction of symbolic boundaries of a community.

#### **IV. DETRIBALISATION AND RE-TRIBALISATION**

Abner Cohen has studied a phenomenon similar to the one I am dealing with. In a book written from a yearlong fieldwork in the city of Ibadan, Nigeria, he built a model based upon tribalisation and de-tribalisation<sup>62</sup>. Cohen believes that ethnicity and cultural revival is more a matter of politics than cultural conservatism. He represents it as being two extremities of a virtual line. At on one end is found a state of de-tribalisation (customs and tradition vanished or abandoned) and on the other begins a process of re-tribalisation (customs are revived and made relevant, for some given purposes).

Abner Cohen writes that the process of de-tribalisation could have been caused by the colonization (what Mamdani had called the “tradition washing”, and that I have mentioned of neutralization of customary institutions). It could also be the fact that with the advent of new social setting characterized by new boundary establishment and value systems, poverty, joblessness and class differentiation have cut across ethnic boundaries, making them less relevant. This is what happened to Gbaya people since 1894 with the beginning of German colonization in Bertoua.

Concerning re-tribalisation, the author claims that tribalising issues is a strategy for ethnic groups to get organized informally. The ultimate goal is not to resurrect customary features, but rather political placement and control or easier access to the flow of goods. Arguments used in such an instance are redundant and usually exclusive. For example, when asked to justify their actions and claims, the Hausa argued, “their customs, religious practices and traditional way of life were *very* different from those of

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<sup>62</sup> Cohen, A., 1969.

the Yoruba.”<sup>63</sup> There is also the formation of a trade flow based on kinship, endogamy and brotherhood, making it a “waterproof” and closed system. Hausa people in Ibadan used the culture repertoire in that way in order to build an efficient trade system that excluded others and reinforced their sense of ethnic membership.

However, one is well founded to question this model and its relevance as it is hardly applicable to every ethnic group in Africa. While discussing the efficiency of a decision taken in view to boycott outsiders’ products for example, he explains that “it is therefore of crucial importance that some kind of authority which is backed by sufficient power should apply pressure [...] to make them conform.”<sup>64</sup> He is thus either assuming that every group must have a sharp internal organization with clearly defined roles and hierarchical power in order to succeed in re-tribalisation; or he was implying that the model was not valid for egalitarian societies.

I use this theory since my case study has many similarities. The concept of re-tribalisation appears to be useful here in the sense that it presents the Gbaya people on a historical perspective and the resurgence of ethnic identity on a social arena where it has been made irrelevant for years. I am interested in comparing the modes of dissemination of codes and symbols as observed in my case with the ones from Cohen’s Hausa case.

## V. HONOUR, RESPECTABILITY AND SOCIAL RECOGNITION

### 1. Honour and respectability

In his *Honour in African History*,<sup>65</sup> John Illife maintains that honour was the primary value in African societies and was the matrix of actions that were observable. Honour is then defined as the right to be respected, both by persons of equal ranks (horizontal honour) and from persons of superior ranks (vertical honour). Though individuals are likely to expect the others to respect them, Illife believes that honour exists objectively insofar as the others treat them with respect or if they enforce respect. In that sense, societies define their own criteria for respect.<sup>66</sup> In the African context those values are, to name a few, integrity, courage, hospitality, personal autonomy, capability to sustain a household, moderation, virility (fertility for women), endurance, etc. Most importantly, within African history, through the interference of external values and revealed

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<sup>63</sup> Cohen A., 1969, p.106. Stress on ‘very’ by me.

<sup>64</sup> Idem, p.207.

<sup>65</sup> Illife, J., *Honour in African History*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005.

<sup>66</sup> Idem, pp. 3-4.

religions, honour was replaced by another value called respectability, the later more related to status, personal achievement, occupational requirement, schooling and wealth possession.<sup>67</sup> He is not the only author referring to this shift of interest from honour to respectability, as Axel Honneth also mentions the “historical split of social honour into respect and esteem.”<sup>68</sup>

Although the definition can vary from one author to another, there seems to be, a *fixed core*<sup>69</sup> to the concept of respectability. As we have seen previously with Illife, there is a focus on personal achievement, economical independence and orderliness.<sup>70</sup> He argues that the rise of respectability as a social value was dyed with many religious and moral values, bringing the emphasis from rank and prowess to virtue and duty. In that way, it would be difficult to acknowledge respectability to an entire group, be it ethnic or religious. The point here is that respectability relates to personal endeavours in accomplishing particular duties, succeeding at school or in a professional career; in short to their behaviour as individuals.<sup>71</sup>

## 2. Social recognition

Axel Honneth<sup>72</sup> has built a theory in which he argues that social struggles can be understood as struggles for recognition. Recognition is that form of consideration that people have to each other as persons, citizens or human being with equal rights. *Recognising people under those descriptions is a way of placing them on a same level and those who have struggled for recognition have frequently struggled for their inclusion.* Furthermore, according to Honneth, recognition can be defined in the reverse way by implying the opposite. Thus, when people face disrespect, denial of rights or denigration of their ways of life, they engage in a struggle for recognition.

Whilst the content of recognition also varies between authors, the concept does imply *recognition of difference or recognition of universalism* (Taylor 1992), *toleration* (Galeotti 2002) or *recognition as social esteem* (Honneth 1995). According to the latter, recognition considered as social-esteem is a consideration we have for a group of

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<sup>67</sup> Idem, p. 245.

<sup>68</sup> Quoted by Thompson, S., *The Political Theory of Recognition, A critical Introduction*, Polity Press, Malden, 2006, p.75.

<sup>69</sup> Goodhew, D., “Working class Respectability: the example of the Western Areas of Johannesburg, 1930-55.” *Journal of African History* n° 41 (2000) p. 241.

<sup>70</sup> Idem.

<sup>71</sup> Illife, J. 2005, p.246 and Goodhew, D., 2000, pp. 241-242.

<sup>72</sup> Honneth, A., *The struggle for recognition: The moral Grammar of social conflicts*, Polity, Cambridge, 1995, quoted by Thompson, 2006.

people, not only because they are associated with a particular culture or social identity, but because they possess specific features which distinguish them as a unique entity and make them an important part of the cultural character of the society as a whole.<sup>73</sup>

This chapter aims to present theoretical elements used in analysing data gathered during fieldwork. Overall, I have presented four theories that relate to each other and three concepts. Because the analysis will bring me in turn on the level of individuals in the Gbaya community, in the city of Bertoua and within the state of Cameroon, I will use these theories in succession in order to give clues for interpretation at each stage.

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<sup>73</sup> Thompson, S., 2006, p.95.



## CHAPTER V. THE GBAYA WAY

### I. RETURNING TO THE PAST

#### 1. Resources material and symbolisation

During the early 1990s, there was an uprising of groups in Cameroon whose aim was to revive local traditions. Several ethnic associations were created, festival and musical groups organised and promoted. Since they are primarily informal association with no funds, one of their main problems is the instability of their staff. When I went to Bertoua, I wanted to contact them in the hope of finding an informant. My idea was to follow Augustin, a cousin of mine, and see how he moved between activities related to their association and at the same time what he did to earn a living. Before I got to Bertoua for fieldwork, I knew that he was using the knowledge they yielded in the association to earn money. For instance, they were selling traditional medicines, making traditional clothes and weapons for sale as decoration. But when I arrived, he had gone to Central African Republic where he was involved in gold and diamond extraction. I then had to choose someone else. That is how I met Selbi. He is 34 years old and stopped his formal education in his second year at the technical secondary school and he works as a painter. Selbi joined the *Sirta* in 2004, one year after they started up. He says he felt that they shared the same interest for the culture and the past of Gbaya people. I found Selbi interesting because he was creative, calm and at ease with the camera. Although he was always available and ready to explain what they were doing, at odd times, he would disappear from Bertoua for two or three weeks, working on some construction sites, since he also had to make a living.

Money limitations however appear not to restrict the revitalization movements' members in their activities. Their sources are mainly knowledge, stories and imagination. This is illustrated in the building of a royal stretcher, called *Tipo* in Gbaya language and realised by Selbi and his mates.<sup>74</sup> When I asked for details on the building, he said:

Nobody taught me how to build the *Tipo*. I have used only my imagination. Based on what elders used to tell us, I tried to figure out how it must have been like. I tried it first last year. Our elders made some comments and suggestions and I am using them to improve the

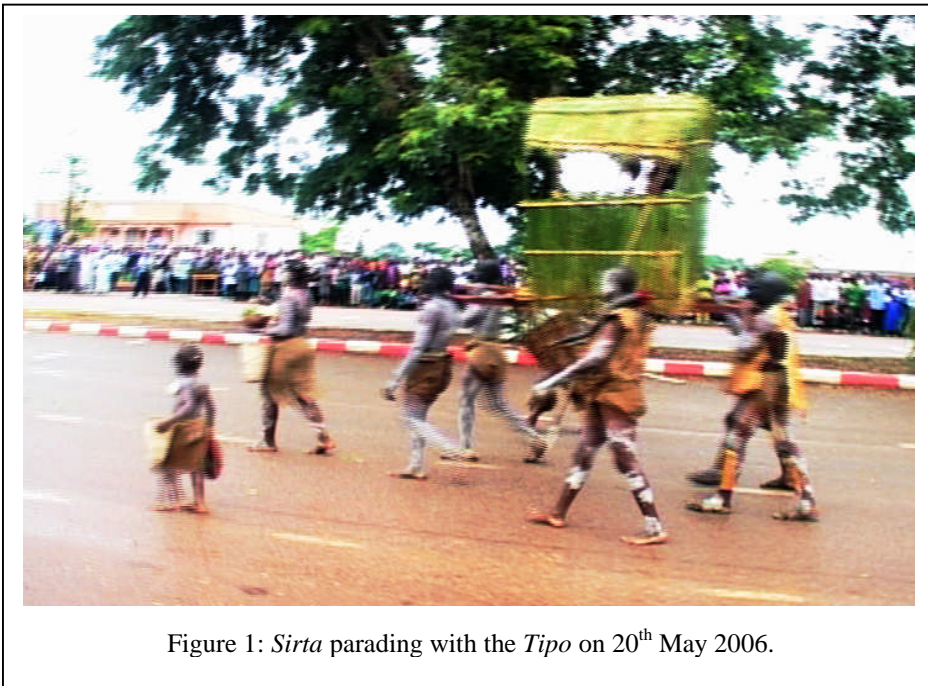
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<sup>74</sup> See my Film, Ndanga, N. D., "Returning to the Past". (Master Film, Visual Culture Studies, University of Tromsø), 2007, 32 minutes.



one I am building this year as you can see. I am sure they will like it and they will see that progressively we are improving it, making it look closer to what they use to see. Sometime when they see this, they just break into tears: they haven't seen it for long time and it brings back a lot of memories.

Unlike what is generally seen and presented as generational conflict between elders and youth, here is a situation where they actually cooperate in a constructive way. Youth have energy and willingness to bring back the past, but they lack the practical experience of that past. Elders contribute with their remembrances that are implemented within the framework of the *Sirta*. The whole process has the powerful effect of bringing together both generations in a kind of symbiosis.



The second aspect of this royal stretcher building is the symbolization of the item. The *Sirta* claim that it is what was used to carry chiefs.<sup>75</sup> Nowadays, royal stretchers are relegated to the past and are no longer in any use. This is what Hobsbawm and Ranger were referring to when they said that, usually items are freed for symbolic use when they are no longer of any utilitarian value. *Sirta* are now creating a symbol for the Gbaya community. The royal chair should remind them of the glorious past of their

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<sup>75</sup> It is uncertain whether this was widely used within the Gbaya ethnic group. It is also not clear if it was established as a regular practice. If so, may be during the short period of time when Bertoua had a hierarchical organization, under Mbartoua. This could explain why they use it as a mean to remember that glorious past.

ancestors and become an object through which they should identify themselves and remember their past. According to (A.P.) Cohen's theory, what seems to be of importance here is not the actual chair, but what it is supposed to mean for people. The symbolic value of that stretcher is perceivable in its use. During the national day parade, on 20<sup>th</sup> May through the main street of Bertoua, the *Sirta* carried a young child, and not Aiba, the Gbaya traditional chief of district who was instead sitting in one of the grandstands. One could understand the choice of a young child as a desire to express hope in a better future: a young child symbolises innocence and potential. None would take the figure beyond its symbolical meaning, and think of it as an attempt to gain real political authority, or a way to challenge any current leadership.

## **2. Royal Funerals in the making**

However, not everything is so easy for the *Sirta*. The fact that customs remained dormant for so many years led to the scattering of energies and knowledge. The instauration of western school, revealed religions and new belief systems gave people new options and different ways of doing things. When the time to re start their ancient rituals came, problems became prominent. Arguments, both internal (among people participating in the same rituals and who do not agree on how to run them) and external (among people who want to perform a ritual and those who do not) can end without any agreement being reached. We can see it in this excerpt from one of the most painful situation I have observed. In mid May, the *Sirta* told me that they were leaving for Mandjou, a village 15 kilometres from Bertoua. The traditional chief of that place died a week before and there were funerals. The *Sirta* group was invited to perform the funeral rituals.

In principle, funeral rituals have three parts. The first part is the transportation of the dead body from the place where he died to his home place. The second phase is the praises to the late chief and lamentation by the family members, especially the women. The third and last part is the burial. This is organised according to the way Gbaya used to carry it out during old times when there were tribal wars and people died during battles. On these occasions they had to carry the dead body back, protecting it from profanation and carnivores. At the end they had to perform a "proper" funeral for him, so that he would rest in peace. Gbaya believe that failure to do so might make the dead person angry and allow him no rest. He could even come back and disturb his relatives. By proper funerals, they generally mean ceremonies without any disturbance, no

quarrelling, and rituals performed as they should be to make sure that all the guests who came to pay their last respect are at ease and return home happy.

The funerals of the chief of Mandjou lasted two days. The main ceremony consisting of the display of the body, lamentations, religious service, funeral orations and burial took place at the chief's compound. It was a place composed with a large courtyard, a shed, one main house (where the chief probably lived) and two secondary houses. A fence surrounded the whole compound. On the first day (it was Thursday) they took the body from the hospital to Mandjou. The *Sirta* escorted the body. They were also the first to greet the body after they placed it under the shed in the courtyard. There were several personalities present at the place: the subdivision officer, the traditional chief of district, several other chiefs from neighbouring villages and quarters, the parliament member for the subdivision of Bertoua, a preacher of the Adventist church in Bertoua. There were also a lot of people from Mandjou both Gbaya and from other tribes. The fact that the event was taking place in such a narrow arena with so many people put the pressure on the chief's family: they had no choice but to organise a ceremony which would honour the late chief.

What I have termed 'external arguments' occurred between the *Sirta* and the host family. Though they are both from the same tribe, there seemed to be some points upon which they did not agree. It started when the *Sirta* took a break. They asked for food. The host family seemed surprised, and the chief's sons said the *Sirta* should wait and be served like all the other guests. After a while, the host family served them a meal made of *Kam* and beef. The *Sirta* said they meant to have a living animal for them to proceed according to the tradition. Since they were "hunters", they said they could not eat game killed by some one else. The host family said they did not see the point in offering the *Sirta* a living animal. They discussed for a while and finally the host family gave in. A living goat was offered to the *Sirta*. They first cut away his testicles, and then one of them cut its throat. The animal was in agony; they then pulled it down and shot it with arrows. The *Sirta* girls cooked it and they served the meal later in the day.

Sometime after, voices among the *Sirta* started talking about having some drinks – they were asking for 15 000 frs CFA for that purpose. A 0.65 litre bottle of beer costs 450 frs CFA. The amount requested would have made them buy more than thirty bottles of beer. Selbi negotiated with the family. They performed some dances until the evening and I went home for the night. When I came back the next day, the funeral continued and now it was the turn of a religious service performed by the pastor of the Adventist

church, and the *Sirta* were sitting apart in their “normal” clothes. When I asked why they were dressed like that, they told me they did not get any drink, which is why they would not perform the last part of the ritual.

I stayed there until the end of the ceremony. Some members of the host family came and asked why they were not performing. The *Sirta* answered and they went back to the main house, promising that they “will see what to do”. Obviously, the discussions had reached a dead end and the host family might have decided to proceed without the *Sirta*. Nothing was done and the *Sirta* did not perform anymore until they went back to Bertoua.

Selbi told me that in the Gbaya tradition, it is suggested that when the *Sirta* move to another place, their host should take special care of them by feeding them properly. Special is the fact that the *Sirta* should not be given a dead animal, but one alive so that they can kill it and cook it according to their own rules:

What we asked then was not a kind of fantasy of ours. It is what we have been taught from the elders about the tradition. It is said that when we go out, our arrow should not come back without blood. So when we go to perform rituals somewhere, people should conform to what is prescribed in the tradition and give us food and refreshment.

Then I asked him what can be the cause of what happened in Mandjou so that the family refused to fulfil their request. He replied: “I think it is related to the fact that people do not know about the tradition, some of them do not understand that what we are doing is serious, that is why there are those who disagree and discuss ...”<sup>76</sup>

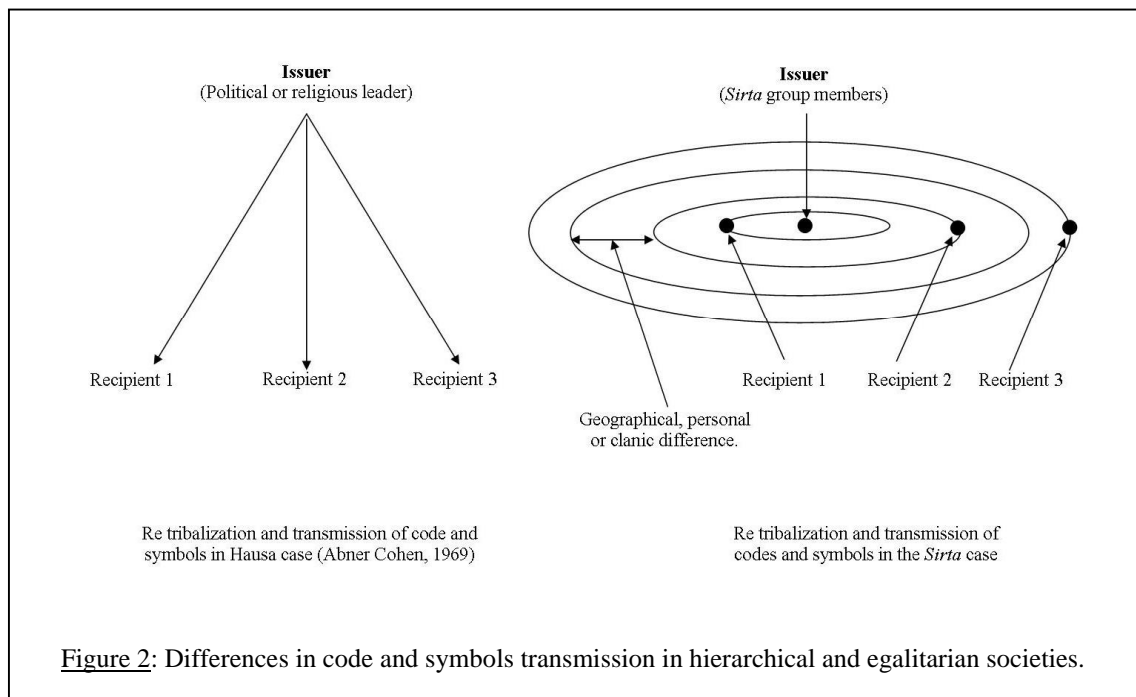
This excerpt is typical of what Hobsbawm and Ranger have presented as the invention of tradition as it stresses on the ignorance of customs. First, as Selbi acknowledged, people do not know about tradition. “Tradition washing”, neutralization of customary institutions, process of modernisation have scattered knowledge and tradition. People no longer use them and rather refer to new institutions for various phases of their life. Birth, baptism, bridal, wedding and funerals are now connected with revealed religions. One can even argue that most people born since the 1970s have never seen a Gbaya ritual. Performing a ritual that is supposed to be traditional in such a context means breaking down those new habits already installed in peoples’ minds and convincing them to adhere. The *Sirta* are in a process of recollection, reconstitution and

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<sup>76</sup> Telephone Conversation, October 10, 2007.

formalisation of something that they present as ancient, but which is new for most of their interlocutors. This explains all internal and external arguments observable in their interactions.

The excerpt also enlightens a problem in Abner Cohen’s theory of re-tribalisation. In his material there is no opposition; orders are sent from the top of the community and are followed efficiently. It fits hierarchical societies where we have a top-down scheme, where the top issues signs and symbols which is then received and consumed unquestionably by the bottom both inside and outside the community. For instance, the Hausa religious and political chief, Umaru, built a mosque in Sabo in the 1940s. In 1952, following a religious argument with Yoruba Imams, he urged his fellows not to attend the Friday weekly prayer in the central mosque. The first Friday after his order, all Hausa went to the new Mosque and they even carried Umaru from his house to the mosque.<sup>77</sup> In my case, I would say that we have a centre-periphery scheme where the *Sirta* are in the middle and the recipients both Gbaya and outsiders constitute a succession of circles around them. (See figure 2). This is due to the egalitarian organization of Gbaya people. In such a scheme, all being on the same level, resistance manifests itself. Also, consequential of distance between issuer and recipients, the former would face misinformation, discrepancies in interpretation or indifference.



<sup>77</sup> Cohen A., 1969, pp. 153-154.

A piece of internal argument occurred some months after. When I went back to the field in December 2006, I talked to Bernard. I asked about his opinion on the Mandjou case. He told me there was a wrong interpretation of tradition here. He said: “They think they should not eat meat that others have killed, but this is because they do not know how real *Sirta* lived. When a *Sirta* goes hunting, if he is hungry and finds the remains of a game killed by other hunters or predators, should he not eat it before he gets to kill his own game?” Obviously, Bernard does not agree with the way the new *Sirta* behaved in Mandjou. If he had been there, I am convinced that he would have said something or discussed with them on the spot. He told me that they have been too categorical, firstly because the principle they were referring to was incorrectly understood. Second, because they were there to perform the ritual and there was no point in stopping the ritual due to some “secondary” problems.<sup>78</sup>

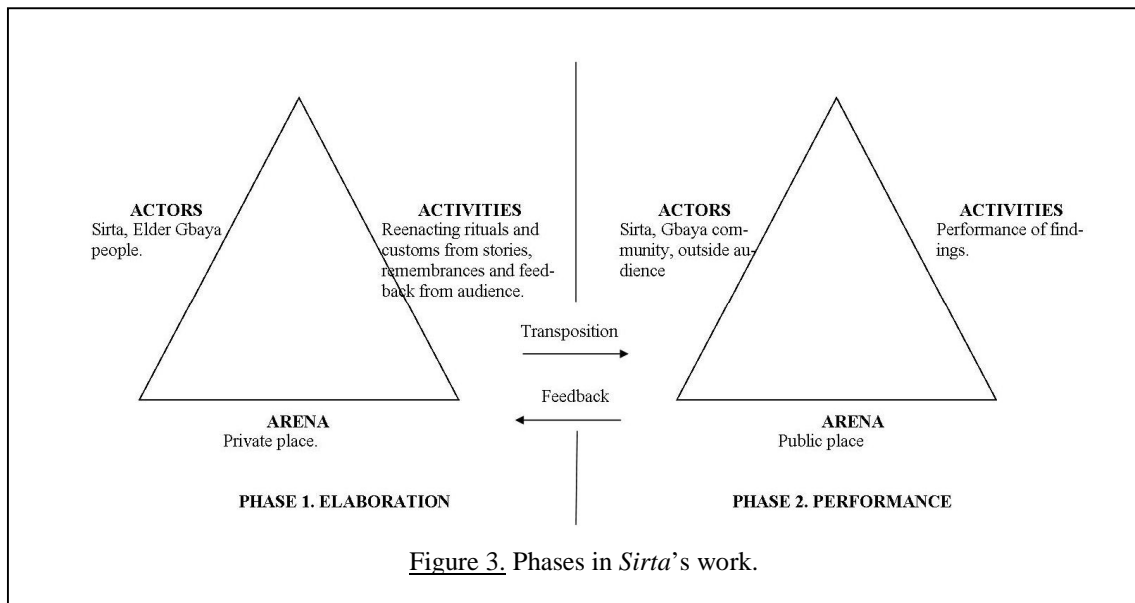
In internal arguments, there are several tendencies. We can easily recognise radicals (in this case, Selbi and the *Sirta*) and compromisers (Bernard). In a situation where they face resistance or confusion in their own ritual, divisions come from the fact that there are members who want to oppose a radical attitude and try to get the others to accept their logic. Their opinion can also veer from the others’ due to their fundamentalism. The compromisers understand the situation in a wider sense. They try to negotiate and are ready to negotiate. This is what Ranger presented as the fundamental difference between old traditions and invented ones. Old traditions are more flexible, while new ones are strict and uncompromising. I would explain it by stressing their objectives. Old traditions were performed as a part of daily life and had no goals other than fulfilling social needs. Newly established traditions need to fulfil several goals at the same time. The most important one is to be recognised, established and respected as genuine tradition by the members of their community and the outsiders. The second point is that they are generally in the making and are uncertain on their own forms. In such a state of confusion they don’t know exactly what to accept or reject in contributions suggested to their work.

In end, I suggest that *Sirta* did not want to compromise because their work was following a sort of pattern where public arenas were only for performances and display of what was already elaborated and constructed in a private arena (see figure 3). During the elaboration phase, they are ready to adjust, modify and improve their performances

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<sup>78</sup> Interview with Bernard in Bertoua II, December 2006.

based on elders' advices and feedback they get from Gbaya and outside audiences. But during the display of their findings, they tend to be rigid and would be rather frustrated if they were forced to make serious alterations on the spot.



In the figure, one can see that during the elaboration phase people involved are the *Sirta* and the Gbaya elders who act as the formers informants. On the other hand during public performances, although the same actors are present, there are also outsiders as part of the audience to whom a specific message related to the Gbaya community, the circumstances or the general context is sent.<sup>79</sup> This is a delicate moment for the *Sirta* and it seems to be of importance for their agenda not to be disturbed. This is why I think that they do not like to compromise immediately by demands by others since their authority in the matter of tradition would be challenged. Feedbacks they get from the audience during public performances are usually taken into consideration instead during rehearsal.

Afterwards, I talked to Selbi, who explained that they had attended some other funerals in September 2006 in Bertoua, in which everything went well, involving all the elements of the ritual. He seemed to be satisfied with that. This illustrates two points of my argumentation. First, it confirms the centre-periphery scheme suggested in the model in figure 1. *Sirta* occupy the middle and the further away one moves, the greater the likelihood to encounter resistance is. This explains why *Sirta* are more easily accepted in Bertoua than elsewhere. The second point concerns how the *Sirta* find it

<sup>79</sup> Cohen, A. P., 1985, p. 54.

important to perform those public rituals. A.P. Cohen thinks that rituals are one of the most important parts of symbolic construction of a community. They heighten community consciousness, and “communicate on a variety of levels [...] they are ‘multi-referential’ and ‘multi-vocal’. At the level of a group-as-a-whole, of orthodoxy, they say something about the relation of the group to others. At the level of individual participant, they speak of the individual’s relation to his group and to the world as mediated by his group membership.”<sup>80</sup> Funerals, or any other rituals performed publicly provide the opportunity for *Sirta* to communicate, not only within the Gbaya community, but also with others. Through them, they display their culture to a wide audience (“this is how, *we*, Gbaya proceed”). With the same occasion, they gather other Gbaya; remind them about their community, where they are from and how their ancestors used to do it. It presents their philosophy of life and their attitude towards events such as death, birth, harvest and marriage, etc.

This provides an illustration of Barth’s theory. In a context where rituals are generally performed in an identical way (Christian or Muslim ceremonies), the availability of a traditional ritual enables the community to emphasise the way “we” do, as opposed to the way “they” do. Through this dichotomization, they not only make it clear the difference between them and the others, but also communicate on the sense of their community and the need for those who have the same identity to follow.

### **3. The Power of Symbols.**

Late in my fieldwork period in Bertoua, I started working with Emma, the leader of the *Sirta* group. Emma is 44, works in a pot factory and has not attended formal education for a long time. At work, he moulds different sizes of pots from melted pieces of aluminium. He told me he has been doing that for around ten years and the work enabled him to get married, raise children and live decently. Despite his hard work, he was still unable to open his own factory, due to lack of funds. I noticed that when I met Emma at the factory, he always introduced me to his colleagues, never forgetting to mention that I was making a film on *Sirta*. Most of the time, our discussion turned to *Sirta* issues: he would tell me what he has been able to achieve with them, his relationship with the elders who are willing to help make their practices better, etc. Once he showed me pictures. The first one was a photograph of Ngaré, father of the

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<sup>80</sup> Cohen, A.P., 1985, pp. 53-54.



current Chief of District. The second one was him, in *Sirta* costume, handing over an arrow to the governor of east province. There were some more pictures, but it was this second one that struck my attention.

I started asking about the context of this ceremony. I learnt that the official installation of Abakar Mahamat, the east province governor took place on 25<sup>th</sup> August 2005 in Bertoua. The minister of state in charge of territorial administration held the ceremony. In Bertoua, during such an event people usually sit as follows: there is a grandstand where officials sit. Two other grandstands of minor importance are arranged on both side of the main one for local administrators, politicians, customaries and religious leaders. People gather, standing on both sides of the avenue where the ceremony is held. Some of them are part of singing and dancing groups. This is a very formal ceremony with speeches from the mayor, the outgoing and incoming governors, the minister and a representative of local elites. All speeches are broadcast on loud speakers throughout the location and live on the local state radio channel.



Figure 4: Emma handing over an arrow to the Governor

By the end of this specific ceremony, some politicians went to the grandstand and congratulated the new governor. At that moment, Emma walked out of the crowd and went straight to the governor. After the handshake, Emma offered him an arrow. The

audience applauded. Emma told me that some months after, the governor called a meeting with Gbaya group representatives.

In the Gbaya community everyone was supposed to own one or several arrows. They were used for hunting and fighting, providing food and sustainability to the family hood, but also protection. Handing over one's arrow is a sign of submission, meaning that from now on, one relies on the new arrows holder for one's protection. The same symbolic gesture was performed in May 2006 when the *Sirta* went to the enthronement of Dogoua in Bodomo quarter. It is difficult to say whether the meeting was a consequence of Emma's gesture. But, since the Governor is from northern Cameroon, a region where traditional Chieftaincy means a lot, this hypothesis is not to be excluded. Now one could wonder why Emma went to the Governor with the Arrow, and not Aiba (the Gbaya Traditional Chief of District). Secondly, what did it mean for them as a group?

I think the first issue is due to the context. In a way, one could argue that traditional chieftaincies are somehow incorporated inside the administration machinery. They are part of the ministry of territorial administration, which is represented on regional level by a governor. Despite the traditional authority he represents, Aiba couldn't decently perform such a gesture, for the governor is *de facto* his hierarchical superior. It would have been redundant and superficial from a person whose position was emptied of its intrinsic value many years ago. It was easier for the leader of *Sirta* since he is carrying out culture revitalization and is not part of the administration, thus could symbolically represent the community.

On a second level, I see the use of tradition for new purposes. Within his daily life, pot maker Emma would never reach such a level of respectability. On the one hand, leading a tradition reviving group gives him more power and respectability and puts him to some extent above the actual chief. The leader of *Sirta* used to be subordinate to the chief but in august 2005, he went before the governor on behalf of the community. On the other hand, one could argue that Emma actually broke the tradition by acting as a chief of Gbaya group. But his gesture had the advantage of promoting the image of the Gbaya people in the eyes of other communities. In a sense, this had the opposite effect compared to what happened during the funerals, where Gbaya people displayed their contradictions and the undecided state of their custom.

Nevertheless, the rest of the Gbaya people in Bertoua approved the gesture from Emma and the *Sirta*. For them, it was a sign to express their presence and mark their territory.

This is connected to the alleged autochthonous status of Gbaya in the city of Bertoua. As I have presented it in the introductory chapter, the setting of Bertoua is occupied with activities controlled by several ethnic groups. In a way, by doing so, the Gbaya were setting themselves above other groups, introducing themselves as interlocutors of the representative of the state, speaking not only as a community, but also on behalf of other communities.

## II. WHAT IS THE VALUE OF A TRADITIONAL CHIEFTAINCY?

### 1. Background Information on Traditional Chieftaincies

The quarters that constituted the chieftaincy of Bertoua kept their political organisation after the rise of the Nation State in 1960. We already saw that traditional chiefs who had allegiance to the chief of Bertoua/Gamane led the hamlets around the main place. With the founding and growth of the city of Bertoua, all the small villages around became its quarters. In the Cameroonian administrative organisation, a quarter is the smallest administrative unit. It is ruled by a third degree traditional chief. Above the third degree traditional chief are found second and first degree chiefs. In Bertoua, there are only third degree chiefs of quarters and one second degree traditional chief, which is the Gbaya chief of District.

Structures	Territory	Leadership
1 <sup>st</sup> degree chieftaincy	Group of Districts	Paramount chief
2 <sup>nd</sup> degree chieftaincy	District (Group of quarters/villages)	Traditional chief of District
3 <sup>rd</sup> degree chieftaincy	Quarters, small villages	Traditional chief

**Figure 5.** Organization of traditional chieftaincies in Cameroon

Traditional chieftaincies were among the only social institutions that survived the “tradition washing.” There are several reasons to explain this. First, in societies where political organisation has been quiet hierarchical, the colonial rulers needed the chiefs to remain and act as transmitters between them and the local population.<sup>81</sup> This was the

<sup>81</sup> Taguem Fah, G., L., “Crise d’autorité, regain d’influence et pérennité des Lamidats Peuhl du Nord Cameroun, Exemple des Lamidats de Ngaoundéré et Rey-Bouba.” Perrot, C.-H. and Fauvelle, F.-X. (ed),

case for Northern and a part of Western Cameroon. Where chiefs were not influential enough, or when they felt they needed to do something more, they “endeavour to find a man of influence as chief, and to group under him as many villages or districts as possible, to teach him to delegate power and to take an interest in his ‘native treasury’ to support his authority and to inculcate a sense of responsibility.”<sup>82</sup> This last scenario happened in the East, Central and Southern regions of Cameroon. The aim of this was to facilitate administration of colonies and solve the problem of a lack of European staff in those colonies. It was also cheaper to have local collaborators.

When the focus went back to customs in the 1990s, the main institution that was visible was chieftaincy. Activities related to it were very attractive and many elites tried for a traditional chieftaincy seat, abandoning their governmental positions.<sup>83</sup> It has been a goal for many people and can be considered as the core of cultural revival movements in some places such as Foumban and Bandjoun in Western Cameroon.

Traditional chieftaincies are structures representing ethnic communities. They are supposed to protect, perform and pass on traditional knowledge. Moreover in Barth’s sense, they provided ethnic boundary markers, systematically reminding people of their identity and their differences from others. Ethnic groups would never totally merge, unless such structures were destroyed, or their influence dwindled. That was the purpose of the unitary state when they diminished a chieftaincy power where it existed, moulded and incorporated them into the administration. When prestige and power of the traditional chieftaincies vanished, it was easier to blur ethnic boundaries and the door was opened for the nation state.

## **2. Same Structures, new meaning.**

In a quarter called Bodomo, the chief died some time ago, and they had to replace him. Though it is a traditional issue, the administration has a strong grip on its organisation. In principle, when a chief has died or a seat is vacant, the subdivision officer (SDO) of the area organises popular consultations in order to collect candidacies and evaluate their legitimacy. When he comes to a conclusion, he sends a report to the division officer, who should approve it and send it to the governor. It is on this level that things begin to slow down. The governor is supposed to send a report to the minister in charge

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*Le Retour des Rois. Les autorités traditionnelles et l’Etat en Afrique contemporaine*, Karthala, Paris, 2003, pp 267-288.

<sup>82</sup> Mamdani, M., 1996, p.53.

<sup>83</sup> Bayart, J., F., 1993, *The State in Africa*, Longman, London and New York, p. 170.

of territorial administration. The outcome of the process can be negative. Then they have to start the whole process again. On the other hand, if it is positive, the minister should sign a decree allowing the installation of a new chief. It is only after the whole process is completed that the SDO can install the chief. The enthroning of the chief is at the same time an official ceremony and a traditional one performed by the SDO and the Traditional Chief of District.

In Bodomo there is a man called Dogoua. He was educated as a teacher and worked as a civil servant in various parts of Cameroon from 1965 to 1997. He started his political career in 1986 in the Cameroon people democratic party (CPDM) as secretary general of the Lom and Djerem section. He steadily moved on until he was appointed head of cabinet of the general secretary of CPDM in 2006. Originally, he is from a quarter called Ndouan and eventually sat there as acting chief from 1992 to 2001, a period during which they couldn't organise popular consultations. When consultations were organised in 2001, he lost to Seli, the current chief of Ndouan and he decided then to compete in another quarter, Bodomo. This is illegal according to Cameroonian law which states that nobody can compete for a traditional chieftaincy in an area outside of their birthplace. However, he managed to sidestep this law and was appointed chief of a quarter in Bodomo. The *Sirta* were invited to perform the traditional enthronement ritual during the installation ceremony.

The interest for such events is usually enormous. It is an occasion for the newly appointed chief to advertise his new position. Because it is a widely advertised event, it can also be an occasion for people to clear out their resentment, especially for political opponents. This event was held on 15<sup>th</sup> June and the feast venue was full of people. Dogoua invited his friends from Yaoundé and prestigious guests from others tribes such as the Bamiléké, Bulu and Fulani. A technical crew represented the Cameroon radio television (CRTV, the national television broadcast channel). There were political elites, members of the administration and other traditional authorities. When the ceremony was about to take off, it started raining heavily. The SDO first read an anonymous open letter that was directed to him, saying that he was doing the wrong thing and Dogoua should not be installed. The letter also said that the entire administrative chain was corrupted. The SDO made a speech where he presented the way the whole process was run. He made it clear that everything went according to the law. Afterwards, he read the prefect decree n° 302/AP/B15/BAE of 5/12/2005 acknowledging the appointment of Dogoua as a chief. The SDO installed Dogoua and the chief of district (Aiba, the decent

of Mbartoua) decorated him with royal costume. A costume made with a big colourful cotton tunic and a hat. The *Sirta* gave Dogoua a royal arrow after performing the royal dance with him and the Chief of District. The ceremony ended at Dogoua's residence where a huge meal and a lot of drinks were served to everyone, as was usual in such occasions in Cameroon.

Rain failed throughout the ceremony. I decided not to film and to talk to people in the same grandstand with me and I teased them on the issue of the rain starting almost simultaneously with the ceremony. One of the men told me nobody in Bodomo wanted Dogoua to be their chief. But they could not confront him directly and making the rain fall and disturb the ceremony was their only way of showing their disagreement. Gbaya people think that some of them can call rains, just like some can also direct lightning on others. Then I asked another man about the anonymous open letter written to the SDO. He told me it was certainly some political opponents of Dogoua, surely Seli, chief of Ndouan. This shows how hard Dogoua had to fight, bypassing the law and making opponents and even enemies in order to achieve his position.

When I discussed the issue with Moussa some days after, he told me he understood the effort Dogoua had made to achieve success as a political positioning. In fact, according to the new constitution of Cameroon, a new chamber in the parliament, the senate, will soon be created. A ratio of 70 % of the members will be chosen among the traditional elites of each region. Thus, for Moussa, Dogoua fought very hard for that chieftaincy in order to reach the senate. In contrast to Moussa, Bernard told me that he does not understand why people are struggling so hard for positions that he finds useless. He explained:

The current chieftaincies are not what they used to be at the times of our parents. At that time, the chiefs were respected and did not have to work by themselves since the population did everything for them. Now if you are not strong enough to have a farm besides what you are doing as a chief, people may laugh at you. Previously, the chief was the one to launch the hunting season and all the animals killed during the first chase were offered to him. Moreover, what ever a Gbaya subject killed, the best parts like a good leg and the hearth were reserved for him. Someone who forgot about that rule was in deep trouble. The product from farms and fishing were treated the same. Today, since nobody respects these rules, it does not make any sense to me being a traditional chief.

When I asked him whether he would have accepted to be a traditional chief, he replied “no”. This illustrates the diversity of meanings surrounding the same institution. Bernard sees it as something different from the genuine chieftaincies he knew. He would have been proud of occupying such a position and performing the roles mentioned above. Nowadays, traditional chieftaincies are totally different and are more about office work and politics. This is exactly why Dogoua is interested. In a context where political debates are highly tribalized, Dogoua finds in chieftaincy an important argument for his solicitations for offices and positions. Firstly, I would say they refer to the same institution, but understand it differently. Second, this shows that they are evolving on different levels. Dogoua was trained in formal school; he is in touch with the high strata of politicians in Cameroon. Once, in December 2006, I paid him a visit, and while talking, he showed me a copy of a law *proposal* for the national assembly. This means that he had privileged access a still unpublished document, thus providing him a head start with respect to his rivals. On the other hand, Bernard was educated as a Gbaya man. He is a farmer, a hunter and lives his life in a somewhat conservative way. This is the scattering of energy and knowledge I was referring to previously. Tradition does not mean the same for everyone since people have different experiences. Some went to formal schools and see opportunities that other do not see. Others remained conservative and see how their institutions are changing and can no longer recognize them. In the end, a traditional chieftaincy that was supposed to protect and promote customary institutions is now used in a symbolic way in order to look for political positions in newly adopted institutions.

### **III. IS TRADITION STILL RELEVANT TODAY?**

#### **1. Ordeal as a form of Justice**

Similar to traditional chieftaincies, there are other practices that were kept active within a long time such as customary justice institutions. In ancient societies in western Europe, Asia and Africa, concern for justice and equity went so far as they believed it was possible to reach a degree of impartiality where only God or nature could arbitrate their conflicts. The principle of *judicium Dei* was based on the principle that God would help the innocents by performing a miracle on their behalf.<sup>84</sup> This form of judgement

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<sup>84</sup> “Ordeal.” *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, Fifth Edition, Columbia University Press, 1993, p. 2020.

was based on hardship, some times fatal. Different practices are known: ordeal by fire, cold/hot water, ordeal by ingestion, ordeal by duel, etc. In each case, the guilty one would fail and innocent one survive.<sup>85</sup> In Gbaya society, ordeals (called *tana mə*) were known and performed, and ordeals by ingestion were prevalent, often resulting in death. Condemned and banished early during colonisation, it continued to be practiced though less harmfully and more discretely.

## 2. Backyard Law Court

One day I paid a visit to Bernard, my old informant. By the end of the talk, he asked me what my plan was for the next day. I said nothing special and he asked me to come to his place at 6:00 am without any further explanation. Later on I understood that he trusted me enough to show me some hidden skills he has. He therefore shifted from interpreter of my fieldwork material to informant.

When I went to his place, he was hosting a man who came from Ebolowa, the capital city of the south province of Cameroon, 480 km from Bertoua. The man came to ask Bernard to perform the traditional jury trial for him. The traditional jury trial that Bernard runs is a ritual in which he asks questions and answers are given by two bouquets of straw (*rhizophora cylindrica*) that they immerse in a mixture of water and ash. Him and his cross the bouquets and make statements. A third boy has to run and pass through the bouquets. If the statement is wrong, nothing happens, otherwise the bouquets get stuck and the running boy can not pass through. Later on Bernard told me it was the way the ancient Gbaya used to catch thieves and witches. For them to perform it, they had to spend the night alone, get up early in the morning to collect the straw and not to wash their teeth. When I asked him what it is that makes the Bouquets to get stuck, he smiled at me and said:

What do you want me to tell you? That is how our ancestors use to do it; it is the truth that works. They use to have another variant of this where they used a poisonous mixture and make the accused drink it. It is only the guilty who could feel bad to die; sometime they just give it to a chicken. Then the chicken would fall and die when the turn of the guilty one comes.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> The Lectric Law Library, "Legal Definition", <http://www.lectlaw.com/def2/o021.htm> , accessed 13th September 2007.

<sup>86</sup> Ndanga, N. D., 2007, 32 minutes.



The man from Ebolowa wanted to know more about his elder brother's disease. At the hospital they said it was high blood pressure, but all the medications administered to him did not improve his condition. Bernard's trial showed that the man had built a new house and recently moved in. But some harmful person had buried something in that house which was making him sick. The solution was to find someone to go to Ebolowa and dig it up.



Figure 6: Bernard (left) performing the traditional Trial.

My informant Moussa is a trainee Lawyer. After I had seen this, I asked him what his opinion was about that kind of trial. He told me he knew about it and that during an inquiry, witnesses can lie and investigators can ask wrong questions. Thus the Court sometime makes wrong decisions, convicting the innocent and letting free the guilty. But with the trial by ordeal, there is no room for error.

The second time I went to the traditional trial, Bernard was hosting a man who came from Douala, approximately 710 km from Bertoua. This man was coping with the loss of various items in his house and had also recently survived a car accident. He suspected that someone from his neighbourhood was trying to kill him. With his straw, Bernard established that his wife was trying to harm him in mystical way and showed him what to do. The detail that struck me the most was the professional occupation of the man: he said we worked at the police department in Douala. This illustrates a sort of crossroads feeling people have nowadays in Cameroon. Modernisation has brought a lot of enthusiasm in local populations. They happily attended schools or sent their children to schools, voluntarily relinquished their old habits and costumes, and they dress and speak western. But when they began to face the negative elements of the phenomenon

such as joblessness, poverty, debt, funds embezzlements and corruption, people gradually lost faith in the system. Interest for customary social institutions is therefore dictated by the context and the prestige that they can provide. At the same time, new focus on those activities can be considered as backed by a need for something that people did not find in modern institutions. The example given here is related to the justice and the way inquiries are made in order to establish the truth. Since sometimes the official law courts fail in accomplishing its duties, people tend to look elsewhere.



## CHAPTER VI. CONCLUSIONS

The major concern of this thesis has been to look at the process of cultural revitalization among the Gbaya and trace means and challenges observable within this process. The purpose of this chapter is not to definitively conclude the debate on the issue for several reasons. Firstly, eastern Cameroon is an almost 'virgin area', academically speaking. Some more works are forthcoming, making the present one just a beginning. Secondly, the issues of culture revival, ethnicity and social and political struggle are so wide and so complex that none could pretend to have captured the entire theme and make definite conclusions in the scope of this short thesis. I will therefore limit myself to present some tentative conclusions that one could have drawn from my fieldwork experience.

### 1. Use of story tales in the (re) invention of tradition

As for the objectives of the study are concerned, I would first agree with Abner Cohen on the de-tribalisation process and acknowledge the loss of tradition in African societies, or at least among Gbaya. They have lost many of the signs and symbols that characterize their ethnic specificity. This is seen through the common concern for cultural revival activities, and also from the premise that reviving tradition means that one acknowledges first that it has disappeared or is inactive. When it comes to the means used to revive it in the context the *Sirta*, it can be observed that people use their own imagination and stories from elders and implement them. This is what is seen during the making of the royal stretcher where both youth and elders cooperate in order to build up an ancient and no longer used item. Negotiations between participants in the process can be fruitful as it helps to enhance the materials that are brought back. Negotiations can also turn to arguments when participants do not agree on the sense or the content of their work. This study has shown that such situations are not a sign of collapse of ethnic identity, but rather a mark of concern to what should be taken and presented as genuinely part of the Gbaya tradition.

Those arguments seen during the royal funerals also highlighted the invention of tradition. For people who haven't experienced them, such rituals are new and can be presented as invented, hence the opposition and misunderstanding seen on the spot. Furthermore, because they are in a process of reconstruction, pieces of them are still to be collected and their significance to be passed on. This also opens the door to diverse interpretations and use of cultural items for different purposes.

## 2. Dispersion of traditional knowledge and “cultural stuffs”.

Whilst Fredrik Barth believes that ethnic boundaries are most important, we should not forget that the significance of the “cultural stuffs” enclosed into those boundaries should not be taken for granted. This is because culture by itself is dynamic, cultural stuffs are not fixed, and my study reinforces this position. It is observable that actors involved in the revival work never disagree on their ethnic membership. The main point of disagreement was the cultural stuffs that their ethnic identity implied. During the royal funerals, both the host family and *Sirta* agreed upon their Gbaya identity; they also agreed to have Gbaya funerals that would be different from other people’s. But then, they couldn’t agree on the *modus operandi* as the demands from the *Sirta* grew. The same was seen for the enthronement of a Traditional Chief where, despite that all the actors agreed on the relevance of the structure, they did not find a common ground as regards to its contents and significance.

This discrepancy in the interpretation of custom can be presented as the consequence of the dispersion of energy and knowledge. In the same vein, Ninga Songo said:

Socialization into the society of necessity was effected through rites de passage within the ethnic group. Initiation rites imbued the young with general rules for moral and social behaviour. Today the socialization is fragmented between the family, the school and one of the world religions, and consists of a variation of values.<sup>87</sup>

This occurred within the process of modernisation carried out by missionaries, colonizers and then the state. People went through different educational processes and life experiences, new institutions such as revealed religions, schools, bureaucracy, etc. invaded people’s lives. At the end, coupled with the ignorance of their culture, members of ethnic groups can no longer give the same meaning to structures such as chieftaincy or rituals. Generally the *Sirta* face divergence in interpretation, resistance of new routines and social institutions, uncertainty, their authority as issuer of symbols is sometime questioned. These are the problems *Sirta* face in the process of revitalization of their culture.

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<sup>87</sup> Ninga Songo, “Le ‘Labi’, Rites d’initiation des Gbaya, Meiganga.” Boutrais, J., (ed) *Peuples et cultures de l’Adamaoua, Cameroun*. Paris, ORSTOM/Ngaoundere Anthropos, p. 186. Translated and cited by Waage, T., 2006, p. 67.

### **3. Traditional knowledge as a new means for respectability and social recognition.**

The starting point of the study was the marginality of the Gbaya people in the region of Bertoua and the efforts made in order to get back their alleged former position. It has been argued that some of the methods used in creating this perspective were the manipulation of history and tradition. According to Anthony Cohen, in such a context (fight for recognition, threat of assimilation, etc.) some people can decide to strengthen their group consciousness by promoting symbols and rituals. Traditional knowledge and everything enclosed such as practices and items are therefore used as landmarks for both building up a strong group consciousness and presenting it to outsiders. On a personal level, it gives actors of such a process a new opportunity for respectability. Emma and Selbi for instance, are perceived as leaders and respected persons for their job within the *Sirta* group. The study showed how powerful can be since Emma greeted the newly installed governor just like other political elites and administrators. On an intra ethnic level, reviving Gbaya culture creates a new pride in Gbaya people and a concern for issues related to their community. Symbols such as the royal stretcher remind them of an imagined common past and ancestors. Difficulties faced in that process are for example, the lack of an internal hierarchy that would send out signs and orders. This makes it difficult for the senders to obtain approval as geographical, social and educational background and clanic distance veer.

On an inter ethnic level, the Gbaya people present themselves to the rest of the world and show how they see things, and how their lives are organised according to circumstances and create ground for claims. It is in that extent that I would say that traditional knowledge is also used as a mean for social esteem. Here, Gbaya people see themselves as masters of a specific cultural identity making them a unique group with respect to the others. They also contribute to enrich the diversity of the country as a whole. In this respect, Gbaya people would say they are entitled to be treated on an equal footing with others, and even benefit from their historical pre-eminence in Bertoua to access opportunities.

### **4. Almost assimilated.**

In the end, this study has presented the survival of some old forms of rituals alongside new institutions. It was the case of the trial by ordeal. The same can be said of the new mark of interest given to traditional institutions and practices from people who are at the

same time involved in imported institutions. Anthropologically speaking, I would say that the process of modernization, what Abner Cohen would call de-tribalisation, was not completed in local populations. Missionaries, colonial power and the state did not succeed in eradicating cultural differences. People still have some remnants of tradition or at least a reserve of 'african-ness' (in this case, I would say 'gbaya-ness') where they find resources to solve problems inherent in a new context. This duality/"two-face" aspect is also characterized by a sort of ambivalence. People experience that they do not master their own tradition any more; at the same time they feel that they do not master modern institutions either. This is why we see people like the Gbaya, struggling for recognition within the modern state system, and consulting Bernard when they have problems to solve. This illustrates a situation Mamdani<sup>88</sup> has summarized elegantly: they are citizens of a modern State and, at the same time, subjects of customary political institutions.

Throughout this thesis, I wanted to show how in a contemporary context, Gbaya people are struggling in order to keep up their tradition, their distinctiveness and their position within the socio political setting. Some theories used in that sense showed efficiency. For instance, Barth's "Ethnic Groups and Boundaries" helped me highlight the prevalence of ethnic boundaries as the cultural stuffs are fluctuating and under constant negotiation. Most of the arguments and negotiations seen between my informants were eventually related to cultural stuffs. Anthony Cohen's "Symbolic Construction of a Community" was of a great help. With this theory, I underlined the relevance of dichotomization between Gbaya people and other ethnic groups. Moreover, the symbolism of a community was strengthened. In contemporary urban Cameroon, it is definitely difficult to perceive ethnic groups as structural, territorial or occupational entities because they mingle into each other within those fields. Their ethnic membership mostly rest upon their acceptance of a common body of symbols, shared past and tradition and their common fight for a better future. The "Invention of Tradition" by Hobsbawm and Ranger was used to show how traditions are brought back and utilized for various purposes. This thesis demonstrated how, on a personal level, respectability was granted to some of the actors involved in the process, while, on a community level the Gbaya ethnic group were manipulating their history and tradition

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<sup>88</sup> Mamdani, M., 1996.

in order to reach social recognition, not only in the eyes of other ethnic groups, but also vis-à-vis the state government.

On a general level of analysis, de-tribalization and re-tribalization from Abner Cohen were used as the two ends of the same process of gradual loss and regain of customary lifestyle and relevance of ethnic identity. However, this approach was limited as far as the process of re-tribalization was concerned. By presenting a top-down scheme for the transmission of codes, Abner Cohen excluded egalitarian societies where it is rather a flat structure. Moreover, he neglected the complexity of the relevance of ethnicity. Nowadays, it is a realm where various forces and actors interact: religions, educational backgrounds, state government, non-governmental and international organizations, personal and group interests, etc.

Today in Bertoua, with the influence of work done by the *Sirta* and other Gbaya associations such as MOINAM and ASGBAGAI, things are slowly changing. Gbaya people are moving from shame to pride. The change is occurring among the active people involved in the revival process. It is also perceivable within what has been a more passive wider Gbaya ethnic group who now dare to reveal their identity. They now have reasons to believe they have a glorious past, and that this past can provide hope and energy for a better future.





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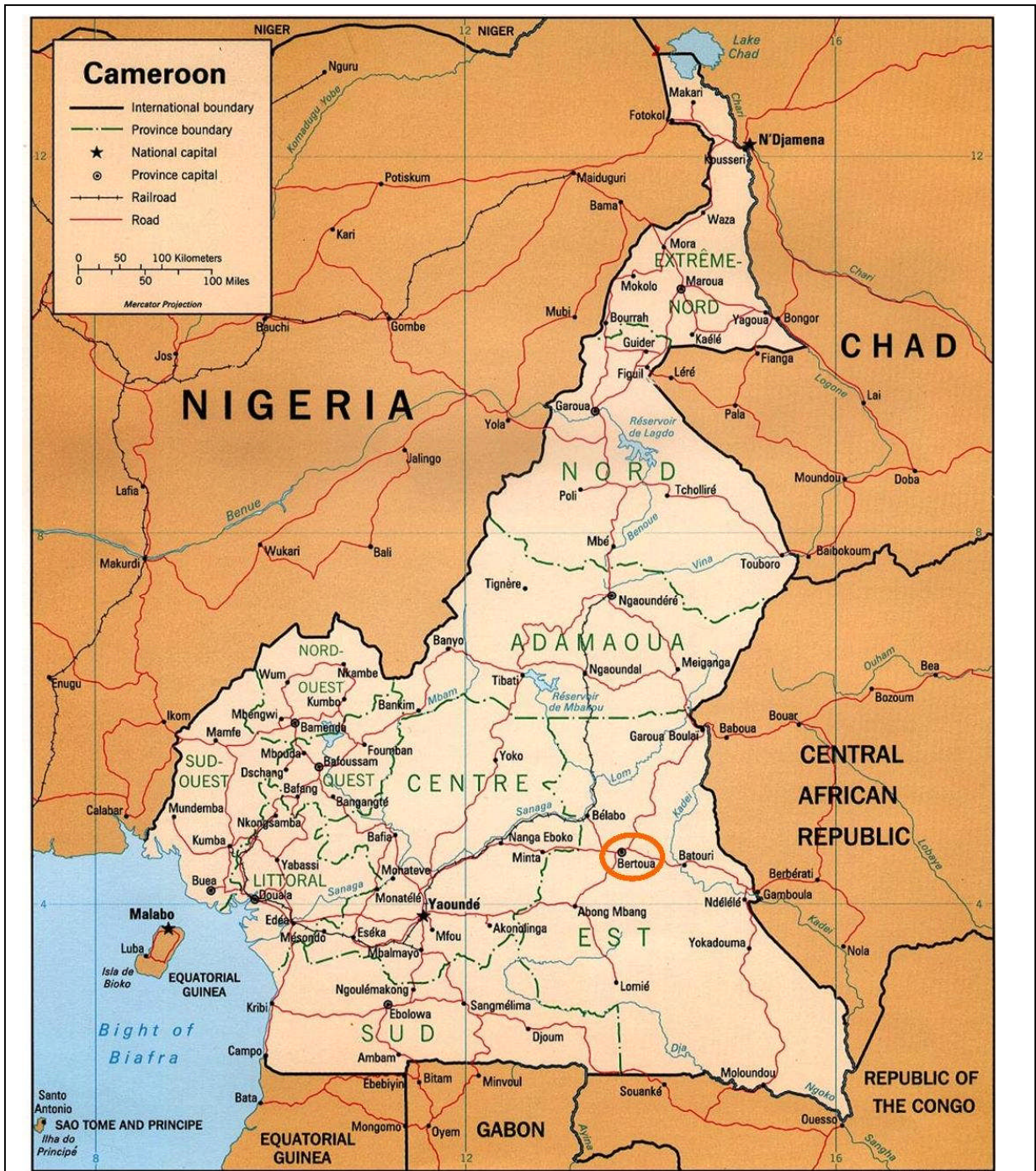
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## APPENDICES



**Appendix 1.** Map of Cameroon, showing Bertoua. Sources: the University of Texas at Austin, <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/cameroon.html>; accessed on the October 9, 2007.



