

Preface

This is not a book conceived and written in one mould but a collection of articles, which have been published in various journals. From the outset it was not my intention to write a book about the Yamba of Cameroon. As I got more and more interested in the rich ritual heritage of the Yamba and my research material increased in volume I thought it would be helpful to the students of the Cameroon Grassfields and to the Yamba people themselves to share my findings with a wider public by writing a few articles, especially since Yamba is ethnologically still a rather blank area.

In January 1996, Sally Chilver, whose encouragement and enthusiastic support has made my ethnographical scribbling possible, suggested that it would be a good idea to bring together in a single volume the articles which had appeared in various journals and any future ones I was intending to write.

Thus I present here eight previously published papers, with only few changes due to additional research. These changes do not invalidate what I had originally written but supply further information on the topic discussed. However, to avoid unnecessary repetitions, I have brought together in a first introductory chapter some historical, geographical and linguistic material, which introduced some of the earlier articles. The chapters in the book are arranged in the order the articles had been published, which does not necessarily mean the order in which they have been written.

In addition, I include an unpublished paper, viz. 'Notes on Yamba Kinship Terminology', as Appendix A.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the help of all those who, in one way or the other, have aided my efforts in realising this study. As already mentioned, I owe a huge debt to Sally Chilver for her encouragement and assistance. She has guided my research right from the outset and has been an invaluable source of ideas. I am most grateful to her for the patience in correcting my English and for sharing her data and her reactions to my work. The extent of my debt to her can be measured from the fact that without her help I would not have dared to publish anything.

I am also indebted to David Zeitlyn whose work on Mambila divination inspired my research into Yamba divination. I am grateful to him for having edited my paper 'Yamba Spider Divination' for publication. He also read a

first draft of the ‘Notes on Yamba Kinship Terminology’ and gave valuable suggestions and criticism.

In writing Chapter Nine (‘Crying the Death’. Rituals of Death among the Yamba), I have benefited greatly from my correspondence with Michael Jindra who at the time was writing his thesis on death celebrations in the Bamenda Grassfields (Jindra 1997). I am sincerely grateful to him for sending me excerpts from the concluding chapter of his thesis.

The most profound gratitude is felt towards my two regular informants, Pa Monday Kongnjo and Sam Kobuin who have become my friends and steady companions. It was their wisdom and ability, which helped me to understand the more subtle aspects of the Yamba way of ‘doing and seeing things’. Their information has been invaluable. This book is an extension of my conversations with them. In more than one sense this is their own book. Many other people have contributed to this study in important ways. It is impossible to mention them all. I extend my gratitude to them all.

ORTHOGRAPHY

The Yamba language has a number of different dialects. The degree of mutual intelligibility varies according to the distance between villages. When using Yamba terms in this book I follow the Bom dialect in Chapter Four (‘Yamba Spider Divination’), the Mfe dialect in Chapter Six (‘Yamba Twin Ritual’) for Upper Yamba, and the Gom dialect in the rest of the chapters for Lower Yamba, the reason being that I did my research mainly in Gom village, Lower Yamba, except for spider divination and twin ritual. Where necessary I give the Yamba terms for both Lower and Upper Yamba. The orthography I use approximates to the one approved for the Yamba New Testament translation by S.I.L. which follows the Mbem dialect. Four special symbols are employed: *e* as in *let*, *ə* as in *learn*, *u* as in the German word *für* (Umlaut), and *ŋ* as in *song*. In Yamba speech initial and end consonants are often lost through elision, e.g. *ta fak* (*tap fak*), *nda rum* (*ndap rum*), *songoŋ* (*nsongoŋ*), etc. In the text I use the elided form. Although tones are important in Yamba speech I only indicate them where a difference in tone changes the meaning of the word e.g. *tɛ'tsə* (father-in-law), *tɛ'tsə* (mother's father/brother, matrikin).

Chapter 1: Introductory

The Yamba

The Yamba people live in the north-eastern corner of the Cameroon Grass-fields (Map.1). Administratively they are part of the Nwa Subdivision of the Donga Mantung Division of the North-West Province of the Republic of Cameroon. Nwa Subdivision was set up in 1963 with headquarters in Nwa. It comprises three areas of almost equal size: the Mfumte area in the North (473 square kilometres), the Yamba area in the centre (491 square kilometres), and the Mbaw area in the South (490 square kilometres) (Yaoundé 1973: 8). According to the last National Census conducted in April 1987, Nwa Subdivision has a population of 52,896. This was not broken down by ethnicity but the 1970 census gave the Yamba population as 20,555 (*ibid.*). This census figure does not include Yamba speakers outside their native area. It is now estimated that more than 50% of the Yamba population reside in other parts of Cameroon and Nigeria.

The reasons for this exodus are many but can be reduced, in the main, to a lack of infrastructure: the few motorable tracks are impassable for the greater part of the year, including even the main road to Nwa, the regional headquarters; several villages are still without any road connections. It can be attributed to lack of employment and economic prospects; to shortage of fertile farmland; to the search for an easier life, especially by the young people; and last but not least, to the fear of witchcraft - all conduce to the pressures on an increasing population. Yet most Yamba abroad keep regular contact with their native villages and return there for the annual dances, for funerals, family and marriage matters, rituals, and because of sickness.

The Yamba, formerly lumped together with their northern neighbours, the Mfumte, and known under the common name 'Kaka' and later, since 1933, referred to as the 'Mbem' by the British colonial administration, are a patrilineal¹ and patrilocal people. They have been largely isolated from the rest of the world because of the inaccessibility of their land and by inter-village hostilities (Jikong 1979: 17; see also Buinda 1987). The name 'Kaka' seems to have been given to them by the Fulani slave-raiders from Banyo. Migeod writes (1925: 134):

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1. Gebauer (1964: 20) is mistaken when he states that the Yamba are 'matrilineal and matrilocal' (cf. Chilver and Kaberry 1968:29), misled, perhaps, by the long period of uxorilocal bride-service which precedes the establishment of an independent household.

2 Chapter 1. Introductory

As to the name Kaka, the Lom (Rom) people are said to be Kaka because they are settled in the Kaka country. When the Germans first came to Banyo, Tonga (the chief of Rom) said they asked ‘Who are the people who live on those hills?’ And the Fulbe said, ‘Kaka’, meaning the nasty fighting people.

E.H.F. Gorges, in his assessment report on the Kaka-Ntem area states: ‘The very name Kaka was originally merely a Fulani nickname derived from the frightened utterance of a captured native - Ka! Ka! (No! No!)’ (1932: par. 29).

The nickname was adopted by the Germans and the British. The Baptist missionaries, who have been working in the area since the early 1930s, preferred to call it the Mbem area² because the name Kaka was repugnant to the people, having been imposed on them by their former enemies and by outsiders. In 1960, the educated élite of the Yamba decided to change the name for the people, their language, and the area to Yamba. The word is used to call the attention of others when somebody wants to speak and can be translated as ‘I say’ or ‘Listen to me!’ (Jikong 1979: 20; Scruggs 1980: 3). Yamba is now the official name for the people, their language, and the area.

The language of the Yamba presents certain analytical difficulties. T.R. Scruggs, who has made a study of this subject (1979, 1980, and 1981), writes (1980: 6):

The high degree of independence and separateness of each village, coupled with the different times of arrival of different groups, has led to a large number of dialects...The degree of similarity and mutual intelligibility varies according to the distance between villages and possibly the time of settlement.

Roger Moss, a Cambridge student acting as a Plebiscite Supervisory Officer in the 1961 plebiscite,³ gave Chilver and Kaberry a brief vocabulary of ‘Mbem’ (Yamba) which seemed to place the Yamba language fairly clearly in the northern section of the Mbam-Nkam or eastern group of the Grassfields group of Bantu languages on lexical grounds (Chilver, personal communication; Nkwi and Warnier 1982: 18; ALCAM, 1983).

Geographically, the Yamba area is an extremely broken country with hills, shallow depressions, and deep valleys alternating with monotonous regularity.

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2. Mbem, one of the largest Yamba villages, was chosen by the Baptist missionaries as their base.
 3. In the plebiscite of February 1961, the Southern Cameroons and the Northern Cameroons, both under British trusteeship, were asked to choose between achieving independence by joining either the Federation of Nigeria or the Republic of Cameroon.

Along every valley flows a stream, which eventually finds its way to one or other of the tributaries of the Donga River. Upper Yamba is high savannah with an average elevation of 1,400 m which in the east meets the Mambila Plateau. Lower Yamba lies at an altitude of about 800 m. The extremely difficult terrain makes any attempt to build roads an almost impossible task and even trekking on foot is hazardous and exhausting. E.H.F. Gorges, a British administrator who visited the area in 1932, aptly remarked, 'The size of Kaka bears no relation to the time the traveller must be prepared to spend in it' (1932: par. 16).

The Yamba area can be divided into two unequal parts: the forested lower-lying western part, Lower Yamba, where palm trees abound, and Upper Yamba, which is mainly grassland. The people of Lower Yamba, i. e. those living in the villages of Gom and Nkot (Ngang, a sub-chiefdom of Rom, is sometimes also included) refer to themselves as *bwin nfu' nte* (people of the palm tree area) and they call Upper Yamba *bwin nfu' ka'* (people of the grass-burning area).

The Yamba people, a closely related group living in seventeen independent villages⁴ (Map 2), are linguistically and culturally closely related. These villages are made up of a number of rather independent quarters or hamlets which are often situated at quite a distance from each other. A.B. Cozens who travelled through southern Yamba in the late 1940s was struck by this. He wrote: 'As in most of these villages there is no true village, but a series of "quarters" which may perch on a hilltop or cling to the side of a hill near a cluster of raffia palms' (1949: 163). Each village is headed by a chief (*ɲkum*), but there are strong indications that the institution of chieftainship is an innovation, a result of German colonial policy at the beginning of this century if one aged informant in Nkot, who has since died, is to be believed. 'Formerly,' he said, 'there were no chiefs as we have them now. When the Germans first came all people ran away. They would get hold of the first man they could catch, give him an arm's length of cloth, and put a cap on his head. Then they would tell him that he was "chief". From then onwards he was their contact man in this village' (the late Ngwanya, Fai of Makat). All attempts by the British administration to make the chief of Mbem, the largest village, the paramount chief of all the Yamba met with fierce resistance.

4. The 'Donga-Mantung: Gazetteer of Villages' (Yaoundé 1973) lists the following 17 villages under the Yamba Customary Court which comprises the Yamba area. The population figures in brackets are taken from the April 1976 census: Bom (2.420), Fam (595), Gamfe (258), Gom (2.767), Gwembe (804), Kwak (1.144), Mbem (5.870), Mfe (2.389), Ngung (2.631), Nkot (2.057), Ntim (1.407), Ntong (2.990), Nwa (1.835), Rom (2.493), Saam (734), Sih (1.415), Yang (808).

C.R. Moss (n.d.: 41), saw a similarity between the Yamba and the city-states of ancient Greece: ‘The Kaka people are best described by analogy with the Greeks of the great age. Their villages differ slightly in language, custom, political organisation and religious practices, but they have broadly the same pattern.... They are as the city states of ancient Greece, who whilst warring against each other, having differences of dialect, and dissimilarities in political order, religious practices and legal code, yet felt a “togetherness” in relation to states and peoples beyond the confines of their own mountain and sea fringed homeland.’

Yamba chieftainship lacks the political institutions one can find among the Wimbun or the Nso’, especially the use of masquerade associations as instruments of chiefly power, e.g. the regulatory society *ɲweroŋ*, nor do the Yamba have a military system like the *manjoŋ* and *mfu*’ in Nso’ or *mfu*’ in Wimbun, whose leaders are answerable to the chief. The *nzɔr* society (red feather society) lacks the offices and organisation of *manjoŋ* or *mfu*’. The absence of such developed institutions, according to C.R. Moss (n.d.: 42) ‘is due only to the comparatively small size of the village chiefdoms, which in turn is the result of the geography of the country’, and one would add, the separate movements, from different directions, of small pioneering groups into the area.

Even now chiefs have little authority in their villages and are often referred to as ‘government chiefs’. Each quarter, which invariably has its own ‘chief’, consists of several sub-quarters which in Pidgin English are often called ‘compounds’ and which are the settlements of minimal patrilineages (*bu’lak*, or sometimes also referred to as *boate*’, children of one father). Several ‘compounds’ of a quarter are usually exogamous. Formerly, the lineage heads together with the chief of the quarter formed a sort of gerontocracy exercising their authority through the most important secret society or cult of the Yamba, called *ɲwantap*. Nowadays each village has its village council headed by the chief where important matters concerning the village are discussed. Lineage heads also control the marriages of their dependents, either as bride-givers by ‘marrying off’ female dependents or by providing wives for male dependents.

The Yamba live as cultivators growing cocoyams (now the main staple crop), maize, yams, cassava, groundnuts, plantains, bananas, beans, egusi (pumpkin seeds), and vegetables such as huckleberry, cowpeas, okra, etc. Agricultural duties are shared by men and women. In the villages of Lower Yamba palm trees abound: they provide enough oil for domestic consumption and for sale in the markets of Upper Yamba and those of Wimbun bordering on western Yamba. Oil palms also provide the greatly valued palm wine (up-wine). In Upper Yamba there are extensive groves of raffia palms which are

tapped for palm wine and also provide material for housebuilding and local furniture. Palm wine (*ruk*) plays an important part in all Yamba rituals, marriage transactions, funerals, fines, and social occasions. As domestic animals the Yamba rear fowls, goats and occasionally sheep. Nowadays, a number of well-to-do Yamba own cows.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s coffee was introduced and has since become one of the major cash crops. But the scarcity of suitable plots for the cultivation of coffee (Arabica in Upper Yamba and Robusta in Lower Yamba) has been another reason for the exodus of many Yamba to the Tikar Plain (especially the area between Magba and Bankim) and to other areas to the South where they cleared large tracts of forest which they turned into coffee plantations.

History

Little is known about the original inhabitants of this area, but judging from the iron slag and broken clay tuyères which can be found in many places in Lower Yamba, it is clear that the area was inhabited long ago and that these original inhabitants were skilled iron smelters. No information could be elicited as to who these people were. It seems impossible to get behind the devastating period of the Fulani raids from Banyo in the second half of the nineteenth century.

The Yamba are a closely related group. When asked about their origin the stock answer is that their ancestors came from Kimi (present-day Bankim). However, there is strong evidence that the Yamba are a mixed population of Tikar, Mambila and local origin (Nkwi and Warnier 1982: 16, 154). Migratory movements into the Yamba area seem to have continued right up to and during the Fulani wars. Small bands of people moved into Yamba from different directions. Although some informants claim that they moved into an uninhabited area, this was clearly not the case. It is quite evident that there were people living there although the population may well have been sparse. These small bands who were in time culturally and linguistically assimilated, can, to a large degree, still be identified since they are the ones making up the different quarters of the villages today.

Nkot, for example, the westernmost village of the Yamba area has four quarters — Ndu, Makat, Nkeng, and Bomgot. All claim Kimi origin but all entered Yamba by different routes and at different times. One can summarize their movements as follows: Ndu quarter claims a connection with Mfe (Upper Yamba) and with Sang quarter of Gom. According to Fo-Ndu, the

chief of Ndu quarter, they came together from Kimi, passing through the Mbo Plain and ascending the steep escarpment to present-day Yang in eastern Yamba. They crossed the Mantung river and stopped at Mbinse where Mfe settled. Ndu and Sang continued their journey westwards beyond Nkot. Ndu settled at Mendu and Sang at Muwa. Because Sang had problems with the people of Nkeng, who lived nearby, they moved to Gom. At the beginning of the Fulani raids Ndu took refuge on top of Nkot hill where they are still today (Fo-Ndu, 21 January 1993). Bomgot claims to have come from the direction of Sinna, a Wimum (Tang) chiefdom to the south of Nkot. Nkeng points to Mala'. Mala' was traditionally an important centre of dispersal and claimed as the former home of some present-day Tang and Wiya chiefdoms, namely Sinna, Wowo, Mbipgo, Tala, and Kup (Solomon Kokwi Nyongu, chief of Nkeng, 26 March 1993; also Jeffreys 1962b: 176f., Chilver and Kaberry 1967: 27). Finally, Makat claims a family connection with the Wimum (War) chiefdom of Sop. They arrived in Nkot only towards the end of the nineteenth century. As one informant put it, 'They only came yesterday.'

The village of Gom has six quarters. Their historical background is similar to that of Nkot except that one of the quarters, Nkwi, does not claim Kimi origin but instead points to the Mfumte village of Lus as their original home. Ngang, a sub-chiefdom of Rom, which has steadfastly asserted its independence from Rom since the beginning of colonial times, has the most interesting history since its dispersal from Ma-Jop in the Mbo Plain. From Ma-Jop they moved to Mbiame and up to Nso'.⁵ Later they travelled north. They passed east of present day Ndu (Wiya) and settled at Ko-Ngang, leaving behind their 'brother' Se (Sen, Wise) on the way. From Ko-Ngang they went across to Bomgot in Nkot. After a short while they crossed the Massim river and settled at Yeya. While at Yeya, the Fulani came and Ngang took refuge up near the mountain ridge at Malim. At the turn of the century, just before the Germans arrived, they crossed over to the Marom valley and settled there (Dan Taku Taabi, 19 May 1993).

Migration myths are still alive in some villages in Yamba. I select the one from Mfe which was told to me by the chief, Martin Kumbongsi (interview, 26 December 1992):

5. Chilver and Kaberry (1967: 23) mention that five Nso' clans, Taangkum, Menjey, Mbite'e, Nkim and Nggang claim to originate in the Mbo' Plain. It is tempting to suppose that the Nggang clan in Nso' and Ngang (Yamba) are two branches of the original emigrating group from Ma-Jop in the Mbo' Plain.

‘One of the chief’s sons of Kimi, Temnoh, told his father that he wanted to leave and build his own compound elsewhere. The chief agreed and sent a girl to fetch water from the lake in an earthenware pot. Temnoh gathered his immediate family and some other people who wanted to join him. At their departure the chief told them that, as they go, they should carry the pot of water along, drinking from the pot whenever somebody was thirsty. The water in the pot would not diminish. They should continue their journey till the pot broke. At the place where the pot broke they should build their compounds. So the group left, an elderly man taking charge of the pot. They had no specific track or road to follow. They passed through grassy plains and forests making a trace as they went. (Mvwe, the Yamba name for Mfe, means ‘track’ in the language of Kimi). They came to the bottom of the escarpment leading up to present-day Yang and then climbed up the steep hill. On top of the hill the man carrying the pot wanted to break it by force by throwing it to the ground because the people were tired and said that they had suffered enough already. But the pot bounced like a football and did not break. So they continued their journey. They crossed the Mantung River and came to the edge of a large forest. They sat down and discussed what to do. It was decided that they should try to pass through the forest. As they reached the middle of the forest a creeper tripped the man carrying the pot. He fell and the pot broke, spilling all the water. Having trekked all day the people were very thirsty, but as it was the dry season there was no water anywhere near. They decided to spend the night in the place. In the morning they woke up and to their surprise they saw clean water seeping up from the ground where the pot had broken. The spring later on became a small lake (its location is still shown at Kukak quarter of Mfe). Remembering the words of the chief of Kimi they cleared the undergrowth and began to build their compounds. This was the origin of Mfe village. The forest no longer exists and the lake, too, has disappeared.’

The Fulani raids from Banyo, which had a devastating effect on the Yamba area, intensified around 1875 (Chilver 1981: 470). Especially during the first attacks some villages were decimated. In later raids the Yamba were more successful in beating off the raiders. To escape from these attacks people took refuge on inaccessible mountain tops (e.g., Kop Jui, to the west of Rom), in pockets of mountain forest (e.g., Ma-Kop, north of Mfe), and in caves. With the advent of the Germans in the area at the beginning of the present century the Fulani raids came to an end and the Yamba left their places of refuge to resettle in their old locations.

In March 1908, Lieutenant Werner from the military station in Banyo conducted a military expedition against the ‘Kaka’ (Werner 1909: 219-222). The reason for this expedition was to secure the cattle trail which had been opened through southern Yamba (Hassert 1917: 13). The Yamba objected both to admitting their former raiders, the Fulani, and opening their farms to cattle-

damage. A flag-post was established at Mbem. Its main aim was to obtain labour and food from the interior of Yamba for Banyo Station. Shortly before the Germans left a road was dug through southern Yamba linking Ndu (Wiya) with Banyo. After the First World War campaigns, Yamba came under French administration until it was ceded to Yola Province in 1920. The French ignored Yamba almost completely. The ‘chef de la circonscription de Banyo’ visited Yamba once. As from 1 January 1924, it was transferred to Bamenda Division (Gorges 1932: 7-10). The early British colonial period can best be characterised by what D.C. Dorward called a ‘working misunderstanding’. It was only in 1932 that a Native Court of ‘D’ Grade was opened in Mbem. Before that the whole area, including Mfumte and Mbaw (Ntem), was administered as part of Nsungli Native Authority (Newton 1936:1). Up to 1930, Yamba — and Mfumte — was declared a restricted area, unsafe for travellers and traders (Gebauer 1964: 20).

From this historical summary it becomes clear that the Yamba were relatively unaffected by the colonial powers and other outside influences right up to the 1930s. Their traditional way of life remained intact for much longer than in other parts of the Grassfields. Despite the diversity of their historical background the Yamba as a whole show great social and cultural coherence.

3. Methodology, Research Experience and Informants

It may be helpful for the reader to be told how I know the things I describe in the subsequent chapters of this book. From the outset I have to say that I have had no formal anthropological training. I have never had a chance to follow a course in its methodology. But by reading a number of monographs in which the authors explained the methods they used in collecting their data I did gain a general idea of how to conduct interviews, engage people in discussions, and in general to be observant about people’s daily life and activities.

I have lived and worked in different parts of the Western Grassfields of Cameroon for more than thirty years (since October 1967). Right from the beginning I had a keen interest in people’s customs, local history, rituals and beliefs. In the early years I learned Pidgin English, the *lingua franca* of the former West Cameroon which was also the language used by the Catholic Church in Church services and religious instruction, but I also made an effort to learn local languages. I made good progress in Tangikom, the language of the Kom people, in the two years I worked in Njinikom Parish, my first appointment, which comprised the Fuanantui valley, Abasakom (the Fundong area) as far as Achain and Ake. But I had no dealings with Belo valley since that part of Kom was looked after by the priests teaching in St. Bede’s Col-

lege, Fuli. In the beginning of November 1969, I was transferred to Widikum Parish where I worked till January 1973. Widikum Parish was a huge parish in terms of its geographical extension comprising the Moghamo, Bifang, Menka, Amassi, Ambelle and Betieku areas, as well as Upper Bayangi (Bayang) as far as Mile 20 on the Widikum-Mamfe road. During the first year I was more or less constantly on the move, touring one area after the other, only to come back to the main Station in Widikum at the end of the month for supplies and to draw up a new treklist for the following month. The following year I was permanently stationed in Menka, looking after the Menka, Atong, Amassi and Ambelle areas.

In January 1973 I was transferred to Nkambe Parish, another vast parish which included the northern Wimbum area, Mbisa (Bansobi, Kamine and Akweto), the Misaje area and part of Bum (Fonfuka, Mungong and Subum), Dumbu and the whole of the Mbembe area. I worked in Nkambe Parish till 1980. During these eight years in Nkambe I became quite proficient in Limbum. I even produced a small dictionary of Limbum. I became a member of the men's societies *samba* and *mfu*. I joined weekly rotating credit clubs (*njangis*), one of them a masquerade drinking club (*mkun*), and I participated in the yearly communal hunts.

In 1980 I was again transferred, this time as Parish Priest of the Cathedral Parish in Mankon. I worked there for two years. It was then that I started to build up my personal library collecting books, articles, dissertations, documents, and maps — anything published or unpublished on the Western Grassfields, in German, English and French (of which I know very little), from early colonial times up to the present. Through reading and re-reading this material, coupled with my own personal experience, I gained a good background knowledge of the Western Grassfields.

In 1983 I was back in Nkambe for a few months before being appointed Bishop's secretary and financial secretary of the newly created diocese of Kumbo. During my two years in Kumbo I was able to increase the volume of my library. I made good progress in Lamnso' and had the luck to witness the installation of the new Fon of Nso' and that of the Shus Faay of Lun (Kitiwum), a palace councillor of old standing.

In September 1985, I was appointed to the Wimbum (Tang) parish of Tabenken (which included the whole of Nwa Subdivision). My first task was to prepare Nwa Subdivision with a view to establishing a new parish there. During the first year I trekked extensively around the area, getting thoroughly acquainted with its geography, the different ethnic groups living there, and

some of its local history. Sabongari Parish was opened officially on 25 June 1987.

After five years of living and working in Nwa Subdivision, more or less constantly on the move, I felt I was ready to do more serious and systematic research. I was prompted mainly by two things: firstly, having read Paul Gebauer's monograph 'Spider Divination in the Cameroons' (1964), my initial inquiries suggested that it needed a thorough revision; secondly, I had read David Zeitlyn's paper on Mambila divination (1987) which contained a number of interesting findings which I could use as guidelines for my research into Yamba spider divination.

I was lucky in getting to know Pa Monday Kongnjo of Gom (Ill. 1), a widely acclaimed diviner. Actually it was he who found me out first. On one of my visits to Gom, Pa Monday came to see me because, as he said, 'witches were worrying him in his house at night'.

Illustration 1: Pa Monday Kongnjo (1994)



During that first meeting, Pa Monday had shown me his leaf-cards and we had agreed that he would make me a replica of his set. Later that year he took his fourth wife Odilia with her four children to Sabongari because he was afraid 'that the witches of his agnates would kill her remaining children' (Odilia had already lost six of her children). From then onwards, Pa Monday was a frequent visitor to Sabongari, often staying for several weeks or even months. He would come almost every evening to my house and, over a bottle of beer, he would explain to me the names and the meaning of the leaf-cards,

the setting of the sticks, the principles and process of interpretation, how a case was presented to the spider, and many other things. He was a diviner much sought after. On many an evening he would be called away from our discussions to divine for one or other client. He would then invite me to witness the divination. We did not have to go far. There were several spider holes in the Mission compound with which he would engage.

I always taped our evening discussions using a small microcassette recorder. When transcribing the interview the following day, new questions would crop up which I would put to Pa Monday at the next opportunity. All my interviews and our conversations were conducted in private, without an interpreter. We talked exclusively in Pidgin English of which Pa Monday had an excellent command since he had been a member of the Customary Court in the early 1960s. My interviews never took the form of a 'cross-examination'. I never forced him to answer my questions. In fact, it was quite impossible to conduct a straight interview with him in the sense that I would prepare some questions to which I wanted to get his answers. Once I had asked a question would be off on his own. He only needed a catch phrase or word which would get him into a mental track that he followed to the end. Although it was I who, I thought, conducted the interview, somehow I felt that it was always Pa Monday who was in charge. In the beginning I got quite frustrated. But later on, re-reading the transcripts, I found that in them there was a wealth of information which I would never have got by direct questioning. Pa Monday gave me what anthropologists, I think, call 'texts', spontaneous, unelicited information.

He was a prolific storyteller. It was only occasionally that had I to coax him on with another question or to bring him back to the subject about which I wanted information. He was most interesting when he talked about his own life. He always had a story ready to explain a point he made. He was least helpful when asked to give a blow by blow account of a ritual sequence or the meaning of a symbolically informed action. It was clear that he never gave much thought to such matters. Ritual specialists knew what they were doing and as long as they did it correctly, all was well.

Pa Monday was in his mid-70s. He was short in stature and always on the move. He appreciated good company, especially when there was something to drink. He could get vexed very easily and he was fond of bringing cases to the police or to court, a legacy of his stint as a court member. Pa Monday was a bit of an outsider too. I felt that he was not quite integrated into his descent group. He still spoke the Bom dialect which he had acquired in his childhood while he was staying with his matrikin in Bom. His father died when he was a

boy. Thereafter his mother took him and his two sisters to Bom where she died soon afterwards. Pa Monday stayed in Bom till he reached the age of marriage. His descent group did not bother to get his children back.

From his youth onwards Pa Monday had taken up petty trading. He would buy groundnuts or corn in Bom and sell them to Hausa traders on the Mambila plateau to the east. He would come back with salt or cloth and sell it in Bom or Gom. Later on he switched to animal traps and dane guns. For a time he took up wood carving, but his family stopped him ('since nobody in our descent group had been a carver'). His darling son Benjamin got seriously ill and divination blamed his agnates for having caused the illness. Pa Monday had to swear by licking the double bell that he would never do any carving again. Still, Benjamin died. He never really got over the death of his son.

Pa Monday's married life had had its ups and downs. He had married four wives. One wife died in Nwa while he was a court member of the Customary Court in the early 1960s. His third wife divorced him. He took his first wife to her relatives in Mayo Binka (Wimbun) because of his fear of witchcraft. She is still living there with her children. His fourth wife, Odilia, and her children he first took to Nwanti in the Mbo' Plain, then back to his in-laws in Nkwi, and finally to Sabongari. This means that Pa Monday is now regularly commuting between Mayo Binka, Gom and Sabongari. In all he has had 32 children by his four wives, 17 of whom have died. Is it surprising, then, that he took his remaining two wives away from Gom to live as strangers outside their natal area? It was a desperate move to escape from the witches of his agnates.

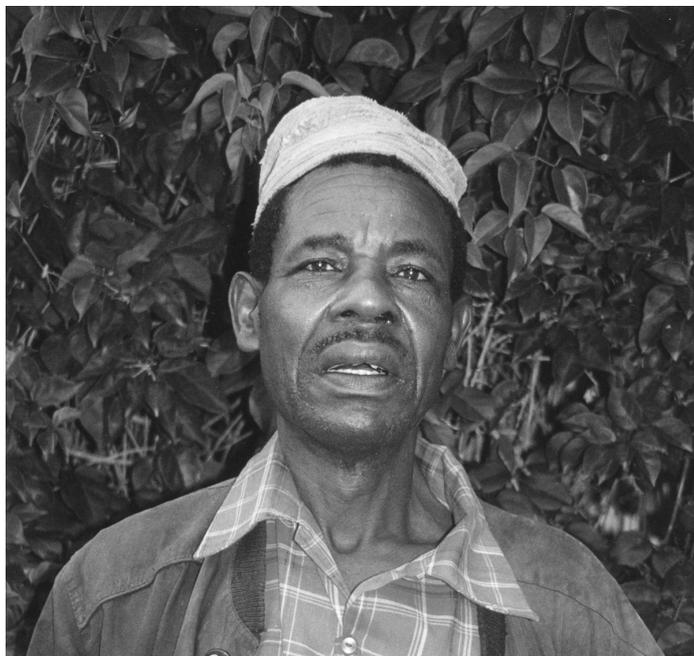
When Takayo, the old and blind lineage head of Ngwen, Pa Monday's descent group, died in 1992, there was a lot of tension as to who would be the next lineage head. In the end Pa Monday was 'put on the chair', although he always told me that he did not want it. But the tension, rivalry and uneasy relationship between himself and some of the senior members of the descent group continues to the present day. Pa Monday is constantly in search of ways to protect himself against the alleged witchcraft of his agnates. Most of his meagre gains from the sale of traps and the payments he receives from divining go to this purpose.

But my main and most trusted informant became Pa Sam Kobuin, a native of Nkwi quarter of Gom in Lower Yamba (III.2). In 1992 he settled in Ngomkila, a quarter of Sabongari where the Catholic Mission Station is situated, with his wife and five children. Like Pa Monday, Sam, too, had left his natal village because of fear of witchcraft. First he stayed for some years in Ngom-

kaw, just north of Sabongari, before building a house in Ngomkila where he acquired a piece of land in the gallery forest nearby which he turned into a coffee plantation.

Sam grew up in his natal hamlet, Nkwi. His grandfather Bokin Kayu who was the lineage head of *Mbakəŋ* lineage (see Fig. 1), had a surplus of marriage shovels (bridewealth was paid in so-called marriage shovels — see Chapter Two) but no son then for whom he could buy a wife. His sister, who had married to a man in Nchak quarter of Gom, had a son called Giya whose family did not provide him with a wife. He came to complain to his uncle who showed him a tract of palm bush where he could harvest palm nuts and *tap* wine. Giya built a house in Nkwi and his uncle acquired a wife for him. Her name was Ngwecəp, a woman from the Sang quarter of Gom. Giya had three children by her. Then, at the instigation of his family, Giya abandoned Ngwecəp and her children and returned to Nchak where he died soon afterwards. Yani Nkeyko, the son of Bokin Kayu, inherited Ngwecəp and she bore him three children, the first one being Sam Kobuin. Then Yani Nkeyko left with his first wife and settled at Daga, in what is now Nigeria. The senior brother of Yani Nkeyko, America Njiku, who succeeded Bokin Kayu as line-

Illustration 2: Sam Kobuin (1994)



age head, took a liking to Sam and he became like a son to him. Sam accompanied his 'father' wherever he went carrying his bag. Thus he was introduced into the different rituals, cults and customs of his people from early childhood. After the death of his wife Yani Nkeyko returned to Nkwi. With the help of his family he married a young woman by whom he had three children. When America Njiku died Yani Nkeyko was enstooled as new lineage head. He died when Sam had already moved to Ngomkaw.

Sam married a woman from Lower Nkwi. When their first child died, he and his wife went to Hamajoda, a quarter of Sop (Wimbum) and they took up arming there. When their second child got very ill they returned to Nkwi, but this child died too. They stayed in Nkwi and had three more children. Then the oldest child, a girl, fell sick and died. Divination 'caught' the aforesaid America Njiku for having 'eaten' the child. This angered Sam so much that he took his wife and children to Ngomkaw and later to Sabongari. But he never fails to return to Nkwi for the annual cults and dances, for death celebrations and family matters. In 1998 he built a three-roomed house in his compound in Nkwi. Since his children are now grown up he wants to return there in a few years time.

Sam is in his mid-50s. He is a hardworking man but he also enjoys his occasional cup of palm wine. Although he does not want people to know it, he is a diviner of sorts using sections of the wild garden egg (*Solanum* sp.). Since he was staying near my house I had met Sam several times. But it was only in the beginning of 1993 when I was doing research into Yamba marriage systems that I happened to ask Sam about certain things I was not clear about. His answers surprised me. He could explain things in a clear and systematic way and he volunteered additional information which I did not get from other informants. He would have been a good teacher had he gone to school. Although nominally a member of the Baptist Church he was at heart a traditionalist. He was firmly convinced of the efficacy of rituals and cults, and he believed in the truthfulness of divination. ('If it were not for this thing there would be no Yamba left'). In terms of 'native law and custom' Sam is by far the most knowledgeable person I knew among the Yamba. But what was more important to me was that he could explain things in a coherent and systematic way that one rarely finds.

Thus began a long and fruitful relationship. Whenever I was in Sabongari Sam was a daily visitor. He would come in the evening and we would, over a bottle of palm wine which he himself often provided, discuss the different rituals, cults and beliefs of the Yamba. Our conversations, which were con-

cult performance I had not seen and explain the meaning of the different symbols and symbolic actions. Later on when I had a chance of witnessing such a ritual I was surprised to find how accurate his descriptions were. I could follow the sequence of the ritual in every detail. Sometimes he may have left out one or other minor detail but all the main features were there. Sam rose more and more in my estimation as a most reliable informant.

There were few things which defeated him. Only very occasionally he would say, 'That is how it was done since the beginning', or, 'That is how our "fathers" did it'. When I asked for the meaning of one or other symbolic action or why a certain herb was used, he would sometimes reply, 'Yes, I asked my old people this same question.' He was never satisfied by knowing only the correct procedure of a ritual or the different things and payments which had to be given. He was keenly interested in the meaning of what was done. Occasionally when I confronted him with some problem or other to which he had given little or no thought and I felt that he was evasive and was avoiding giving a direct answer, I did not force the issue but changed the topic. When I brought up the subject again some weeks or months later his answers were precise and to the point. Obviously he had been thinking about it or discussed it with other people. If he was not sure about something he would say quite frankly, 'I don't know about this. I cannot tell you a lie.'

On my monthly tours around the western and central Yamba area, staying the night in different villages, I would chance, time and again, on interesting ceremonies, performances of rituals or cults, family meetings ('judging a case'), death celebrations and dances. Sometimes I was forewarned of an important ritual, which was going to take place in a certain village, or I was invited to a seasonal dance or cult performance. Then I would try to change my programme so that I could go and witness the occasion. Merely wandering around the villages, I would come across something that would turn out to be vital to my understanding of the Yamba people and their customs. With time I became much more observant about significant localities, shrines, and ritually important sites, which a casual visitor would scarcely have noticed because they looked so ordinary and insignificant. I would take note of all these things and discuss them in detail with Sam and Pa Monday in the privacy of my sitting room.

Although Pa Monday and Sam Kobuin were my principal informants, they were by no means the only ones. Pa Njikwi, Lawrence Nsangong and Peter Jinsak of Mfe helped me to understand the Yamba twin ritual as practised in Upper Yamba. Pa Njikwi not only invited me to witness and photograph the twin ritual, but he also took me on as his apprentice. He showed me all the

leaves used in the ritual and provided me with the 'medicine bag' with all its contents, including the twin pot. In his words I had 'finished everything' and if I had been a Yamba man I could have performed the ritual on my own.

There were many other people, mostly men, who gave me valuable information. In almost every village in central and western Yamba I knew some old people who would be willing to discuss their 'country fashion' with me. There were, of course, some who were suspicious of my motives and inquisitiveness and would not tell me anything. But many older people were glad to have found in me a sympathetic listener, complaining that most young people had lost interest in the old ways of life. Adherents of world religions were often hostile, condemning anything traditional as a 'pagan' or 'Satan thing'.

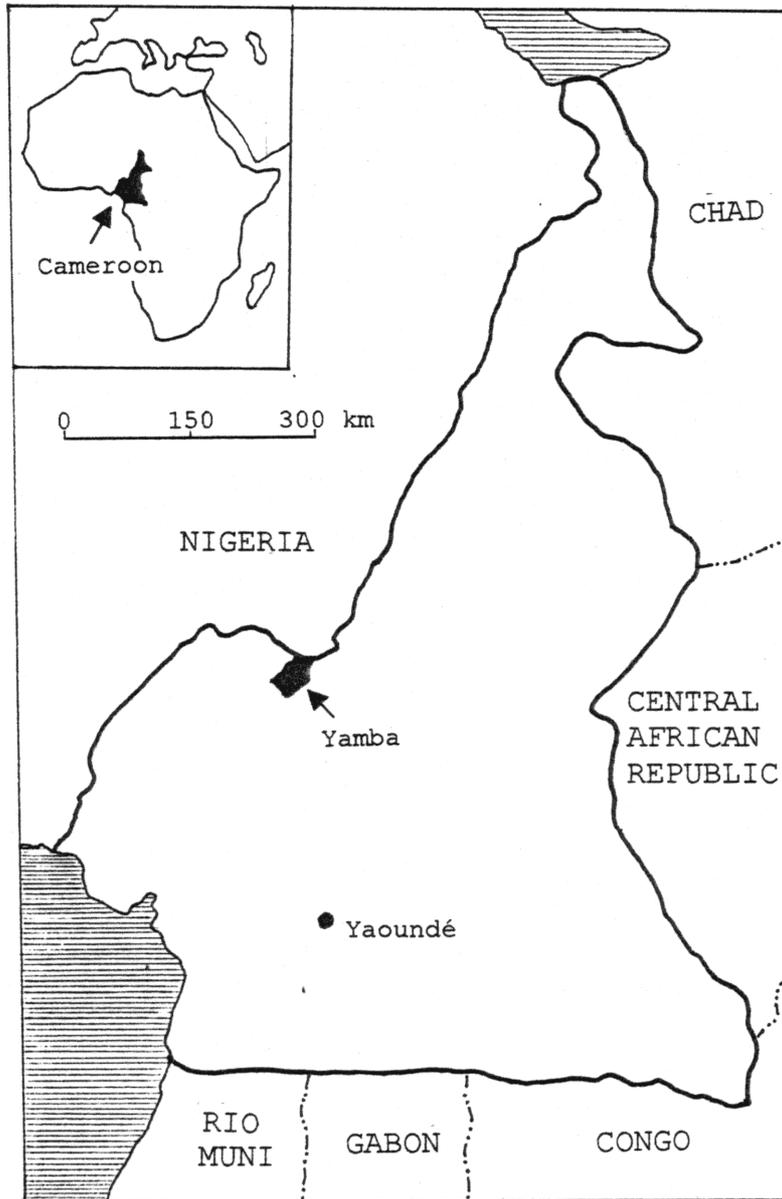
I found it very difficult, indeed almost impossible, to get women to talk about Yamba customs and their way of life, with the exception of two women from Mfe, Angelica Dzebaa and Philomena Lamfuen, who introduced me to Yamba notions of twins and from whom I got the words of the twin mother's song.

Only on very few occasions did I conduct group interviews, and when I did, it was more in the form of an informal discussion. I would neither tape the interview nor take notes. It was only later on, when the people had left, that I would jot down a few important points and discuss them with Sam or Pa Monday when I next met them. I never made use of research assistants or sent out questionnaires. I had all the time in the world and no deadline to beat. When writing up my material I would take one topic at the time. If I found myself confronted with an obvious gap I could go and ask one of my informants to clear up the point or give me the needed information. In some ways this compensated for the lack of a good library which I could consult. All my articles were written in the field.

One of the difficulties which I encountered especially in the beginning of my research was the regional variations that existed not only between Upper and Lower Yamba but even between the hamlets of the same village. There was clearly no one 'Yamba way of doing things'. This was most forcibly brought home to me when, after having witnessed the twin ritual in Mfe, I had the opportunity of witnessing one in Bom. To be sure, the similarities between the two performances were striking but so were the differences. Several episodes included in the Bom ritual were absent in the Mfe ritual and vice versa. The same holds true for the annual cult performances which differ from village to village in terms of timing, of combination of cults and dances, of duration, etc. In describing the various rituals I have found it necessary, therefore,

to limit myself to Nkwi, a quarter of Gom in Lower Yamba, the place where Sam Kobuin, my principal informant comes from, and which I know well, except for the twin ritual which I observed in Mfe, the Yamba spider divination for which Pa Monday Kongnjo was my main informant, and the chapter on Yamba marriage systems in which I have tried to make a comparison between Upper and Lower Yamba. In the chapter on Yamba witchcraft I have tried to give a more global description of Yamba beliefs. Still, I have my doubts as to whether there is any unanimity of opinion or collective view among all the Yamba on the issues discussed in this book. But I am confident that most of the older Yamba, the traditionalists, would agree that what I describe is a fair representation of their customs and beliefs.

Map 1

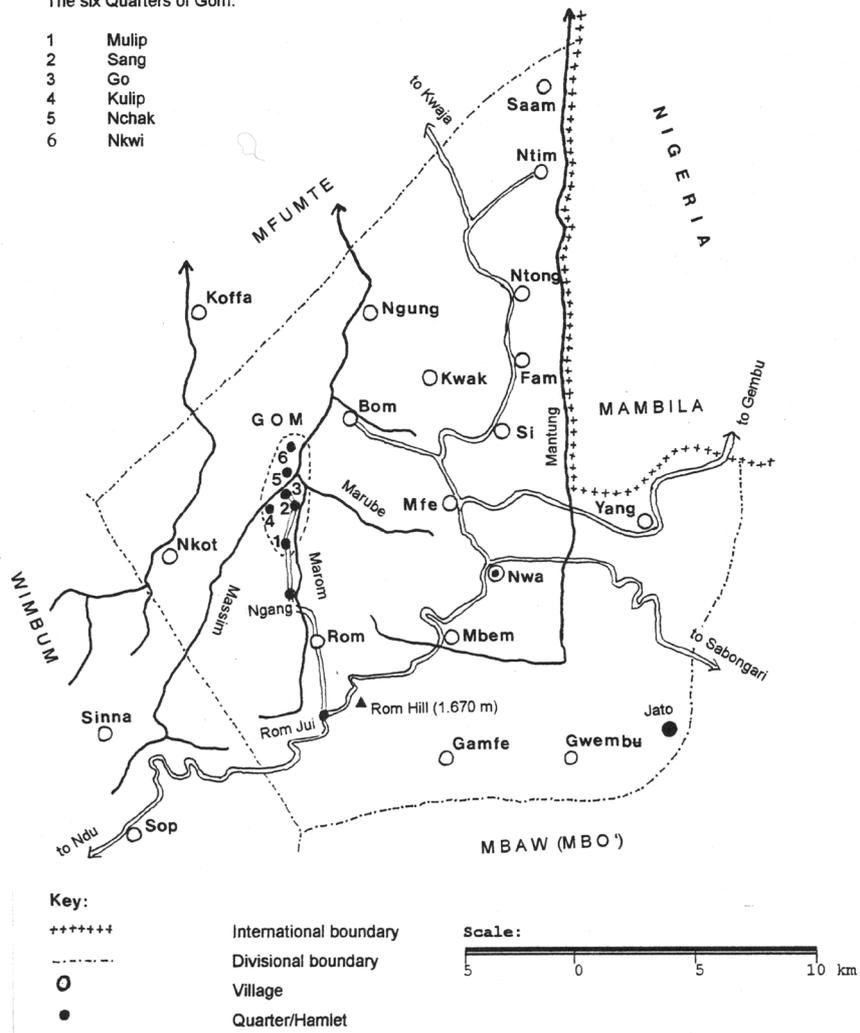


Map 2

VILLAGES OF THE
Y A M B A A R E A

The six Quarters of Gom:

- 1 Mulip
- 2 Sang
- 3 Go
- 4 Kulip
- 5 Nchak
- 6 Nkwi



Map 3

