Chapter 6: Yamba Twin Ritual

1. Introduction

The published literature on the western Grassfields of Cameroon (which includes Yamba) has, as far as I know, very little to offer on the subject of twins and twin rituals. In the past, most studies on the western Grassfields have been descriptions of institutions and how they function. Historical myths and rituals are mentioned, but little or no attention was paid to the message they convey. However, in recent years there have been some excellent studies, which try to correct this one-sided approach. For example, Vivian Baeke’s (1984a, 1984b, 1985, 1986, 1987) articles on the Wuli (Lus) of Mfumte, northern neighbours of the Yamba, are thought-provoking. They show ‘how elaborate people’s “ideas of the person”, their own and other people’s notion of the self and that of others can be’ (E.M. Chilver).31

When in January 1994 and again in August of the same year I was able to witness part of the twin ritual in Mfe, Upper Yamba, I became particularly interested in Yamba beliefs and notions about twins. In what follows I shall first summarize the few references to twins which I could find in the literature on the western Grassfields available to me. Then I shall describe Yamba beliefs and notions of twinship as I have been told them by my informants. In the main part of the chapter I shall describe the different episodes of the twin ritual and attempt some exegesis of its symbolism. The exegesis is that of ritual specialists, twin parents, and ‘laymen’. The question will be asked whether the beliefs consciously expressed by the Yamba are borne out by the implicit symbolism of the twin ritual. It will become clear that there are some discrepancies between what Yamba say about twins and what is enacted in the ritual. Finally, looking at the ritual from an observer’s point of view, I shall attempt further interpretations. It is hoped that, taken together, these data will yield additional insights so that a more comprehensive picture of Yamba perceptions of twins will emerge.

31. Here I should also mention an interesting publication by the KRC (Kaberry Research Centre), the research wing of the Association of Creative Teaching in Bamenda, entitled ‘Rites of Passage and Incorporation in the Western Grassfields of Cameroon; vol. I: From Birth to Adolescence’ (1993, edited by Mbunwe-Samba et al.). It fills a gap left by older studies especially as regards rituals, which mark the life-stages of individuals. It has a number of descriptive passages about twins. I quote the ‘British edition’ which is differently paginated.
2. The Literature on Twinship in the Western Grassfields

Several authors writing about the western Grassfields mention twins and twin rituals but, by and large, they devote no more than a few lines on the subject. The earliest reference to twins in this area is by the German ethnographer B. Ankermann (Baumann and Vajda 1959: 230). Ankermann did ethnographic research in the Cameroonian Grassfields from 1907 to 1909. Writing on the Bali (Bali-Nyonga), he has a short passage on ‘birth anomalies’. He writes, ‘When twins (fa) are born, it must be reported to the king who pours out water (on whom?) and presents a gift. The mother will take the twins to the first slain leopard. She will place the twins on it and take them off again three times’ (my translation).

W.E. Hunt, a British administrator has the following entry in his Assessment Report on the Bali Clan (1925: par. 66): ‘The birth of twins is an occasion for rejoicing, being regarded as a special mark of divine favour.’ The chief is informed who sends Tainyi, the twin priest, who comes to mark the father with dots of chalk. He also gives him two bells. If somebody wants to enter the room where the twins are, he has to ring these bells softly, ‘because twins are angels of God and in their sleep their spirits wander about the room and must be gently recalled.’ In front of the door of the house where twins live a fence is erected. One of the twins is taken by the chief as retainer or wife.

E.M. Chilver, also writing on the Bali (Bali-Nyonga), mentions that ‘quarrels in the presence of young twins or fighting after a twin mother has intervened [attract] sudden blindness or deafness’ (1988: 3). She further notes that twin mothers undergo a certain rite in which they ingest a still palpitating cock’s heart. This is said to provide ‘two hearts’ of a benign nature. According to Bali belief, ‘twins are “travellers” and transformers in childhood and said to have the nature and “body” of chiefs’ (1988: 6f).

Agathe Schmidt (1955: 86-91) says of the Nsei (Bamessing) that, according to the opinion of the people, twin births were ‘something extraordinary from which the village had to be protected’. Twins and their mothers were ‘banished behind the fence’ for several years. When the time ‘behind the fence’ was over, there was great feasting. A ‘twin pot’, decorated with a large red spot surrounded by a black circle, was put in the twin mother’s house. The pot contained palm wine mixed with water and some large snail shells. It was believed to protect the twins and their mother and was regularly consulted for

32. Chilver was told that the twins are placed on leopards ‘because they are chiefs’ (1994: 13).
an omen. Schmidt also mentions the twin dance, which was performed only by twins and twin mothers.

Among the Wimbum, ‘the birth of twins is an exceedingly popular event’ (Hawkesworth 1924: par. 263-268). Twins are regarded as direct gifts from God. There seems to be a connection between chief and twins. Leaves of a tree that is an emblem of the chief, are placed in the hands of twins. Mbunwe-Samba (1993: 57-63) reports a more ambivalent attitude towards twins among the Wimbum. He says that in Wimbum tradition twins (mfaar) were considered by some as a blessing ‘because twins brought good luck’, while others ‘felt that it was a curse because twins were always sick’, needed too much care, brought ill luck and made things go missing in the house. Twins could also affect the parents by making them faint (lipchi nwe). Mbunwe-Samba mentions three rituals which are performed for twins: chango n mfaar, ‘a sort of public presentation of the twins’ which takes place when the twins start to walk; this was followed by a rite called yuuchoo mfaar whereby twins were ‘introduced to eating with people’; finally, ‘at some young age’ there was the ceremony called noosi mfaar (‘strengthening the twins by giving them some medicine’) which was repeated monthly for an unspecified time.\footnote{R. Pool (1990: 72-75) describes this part of the Wimbum twin ritual, which he witnessed in Tabenken, but without giving any explanation of its meaning.}

The Bafut people regard twins as ‘gifts of the gods’ (Ritzenthaler and Ritzenthaler 1962: 36f). One of the twins is pledged to the Fon either as chinda or wife. Twins are regarded as ‘magic’ people and therefore highly honoured.

J.-P. Warnier (1975: 204f.) states that among the Mankon people ‘the fon is akin to twins’. Twins are regarded as an exceptional blessing. They are ‘children of God’ or even ‘gods’. They have power to transform themselves into animals and have second sight. One of the twins goes to the palace as retainer or wife.

In an interesting article on Kedjom Keku (Babanki) twins, Susan Diduk (1933:557ff.) says that twins are ‘heralded as lucky births with special connections to the spiritual world’. Parents of twins are honoured by special names. Twins are considered ‘to have mercurial, mischievous personalities’. Like witches, they can use their power to act asocially and cause serious illness to family members. Twins are ‘feared like witches, yet admired and given respect because of their being like gods’. They have the ability to transform and are said to be children ‘with four eyes’. The Kedjom do not differen-
tiate between the first and second twin but see them to be ‘equals and best friends’. As in other Grassfield chiefdoms, one of the twins will go to the palace as wife, if female, or retainer, if male.

In Nso’ (Mzeka 1993: 35 f.), twins (won nsani) belong to the category of children known as won anyuy (children of the gods). They are said to possess sem vifon, kingly magic or witchcraft. Their erratic behaviour is attributed to their ‘exotic origin’. Twins are believed to be ‘strangers’ coming from other lands. They have to go through the ritual of shu anyuy in order to ‘become Nso’ in name and character’. Animals (goat or fowl) must be given them ritually to play their witchcraft games with otherwise they could try them on the parents who could be harmed.’ The Fon of Nso’ does not have the right ‘to claim one of a pair of twins of the same sex as a page or wife’.

Wambeng (1993: 164-167) writes that in Oku an elaborate ritual was performed for twins (ghon-emyin, children of gods). Shrines were consecrated to twins which included clay pots ‘painted at certain spots with white chalk circles to provide eyes so that they could see because they were expected to care for and protect twins from mischief’. When a twin mother went on a journey, she took a small calabash of water along offering a drink to anybody she met. ‘This was a way of expressing appreciation and gratefulness to God for being generous to her.’ Twins in Oku were not given special names, neither were the father and mother of twins. ‘Also in Oku twins and their mother were not quarantined.’

Jeffreys, writing on the Rom people (Yamba), says that ‘twins are a gift of God’. The house in which twins are born is fenced off. At the birth of twins a goat is sacrificed ‘to cool the power (reduce the magic) of twins’. Before birth, twins live in the ground in the form of an mbumbu which is a thing like a snake'. Twins have special names (1963: 85f).

Finally, Buinda (1987: 76f.) says of the Mbem (Yamba) that twins ‘were regarded as gifts from God’. At the birth of twins ‘the groom’s relatives sang songs connected with Soh’. Mother and twins were enclosed in their house by a fence. The priest of twins constructed a shrine for the twins. Palm oil and meat were put in twin pots and the mother was instructed to sprinkle palm oil and to throw some food from the twin pots on the shrine during every new moon. Parents of twins were not allowed to kill snakes since twins were believed to transform into snakes. Male twins are called Taku and Bibi,

34. In a footnote Jeffreys writes, ‘I suspect that the word mbumbu refers to the millipede.’ This is not correct. Mbumbur in Yamba means slowworm or Anguis fragilis.
female twins Nwaden and Gwaifes. ‘The father is given the prestigious title Tabi and a red feather, while the mother is called Mabi.’

In summary, it seems quite evident that we are dealing here with a pool of practices and beliefs in connection with twins, which have a lot in common over a wide area or, as Kopytoff (1981) and Masquelier (1993) suggest in another context, ‘a common regional repertoire’ variously combined and transformed. I think I am also justified in saying that material on twin rituals and their symbolism is sparse in the western Grassfields, as are publications on domestic life cycle rituals as a whole.

3. Yamba Notions of Twinship

Let us now consider in greater detail Yamba conceptions of twinship and their behaviour associated with twins. As already mentioned by Jeffreys and Buinda, the Yamba regard twins as gifts from God (fa nwi). This belief is common among all the people of the Grassfields. Twins are respected and honoured. The birth of twins is an occasion for rejoicing and celebration.

Unlike the Kedjom, as mentioned above, the Yamba believe that twins are given to rivalry. This rivalry is, first of all, a rivalry of primogeniture. I was told that already in their mother’s womb twins ‘argue and fight among themselves’ as to who is to ‘come out first’. If the twins are mixed, the rivalry is also one between genders.

When there is a delay after the birth of the first twin, Yamba take that to mean that the second twin is annoyed and refuses to come out. When this happens, the women attending the mother will take hoes, pots, and pans and beat them rhythmically singing, ‘Bwen am be-ro, ho-ho-ho-ho, bwen am be-ro, ho-ho-ho-ho,’ etc. (My two children, etc.). One woman may shout in between, ‘Vo, vo, vo, vo!’ (Come, come, come, come!), while another one says encouragingly, ‘Oil has entered the house, salt has entered the house. All these things are waiting for you to eat.’ Everything must be done in a respectful manner. As one informant told me, ‘if you talk to the twin with respect, he will come.’

This rivalry between the twins continues after birth. Parents have to be very careful to treat each twin identically. For example, when they buy clothes for them, their dresses must be of the same material and the same colour, lest one of them should be overcome with jealousy and resentment and should fall sick or die.

The day after the birth of twins, which is observed as a rest day by the whole community, many people will come to greet the mother (mabi) and the twins (fē, fēs) and present them with small gifts. Yamba stress that each twin
must be treated the same, but the firstborn must receive his own gift first.\textsuperscript{35} According to one informant, it brings bad luck to come and greet twins without offering them a gift.

L.Nsangong of Mfe told me that the main reason for making the twin ritual is to bring the twins together, to unite them. When twins are crying a lot or when one twin is gaining weight while the other is regressing, it means that they are still locked in rivalry. Yamba fear that this rivalry may grow in intensity till finally the weaker one will succumb and die. That is why the ritual specialist of twins is called in to ‘fix’ the twins. He must bring them together so that they live in amity.

Twins are believed to have ‘two eyes’ (\textit{lis baa}). They are said to have an inherent power to see what is going on ‘during the day and during the night’. This power is a neutral power which may be used for good or evil purposes. A \textit{n}ga \textit{c}’\textit{ap} (medicine man, ‘magic man’), for example, is believed to have ‘two eyes’, a power he uses for the benefit of people. Witches, on the other hand, use their second sight to harm people. One part of the twin ritual consists in ‘covering’ the twins (\textit{fo’ mven}, \textit{fopk\’ moa}), to ‘lock’ their second sight so that they should not ‘see what normal people do not see’. When I asked Sam Kobuin of Gom why it was believed to be a bad thing for children to have second sight, he said, ‘When small children see things which are going on “outside”, they will not be healthy and strong. When witches are abroad at night, they see them and follow them. Then the witches will harm them or even kill them.’

In former times, before the advent of ‘white man medicine’, if a twin in his childhood fell ill, no medicine man (\textit{n}ga \textit{nc}’\textit{ap}) was called and no medicine given. If a single child fell ill, the normal practice was to call in a medicine man who would, as part of the treatment, kill a fowl and rub some of its blood on the child’s chest. This could not be done for twins. Twins would not ‘allow’ native medicine which was always accompanied by certain curing rites to touch them. If a medicine man tried to treat a twin, he would be afflicted by supernatural sanctions. Twins were believed to have their own mystical powers to fight any illness. Pa Njikwi of Mfe, who is a \textit{n}ga \textit{nc}’\textit{ap fes} (ritual specialist of twins) and himself a twin, told me that even now, as an adult, he does not allow anybody to spray palm wine on his chest.

\textsuperscript{35} Unlike the Kedjom (Babanki) (Diduk 1993) and the Bali (Chilver 1994: 11), Yamba differentiate between the firstborn and secondborn twin.
Male twins are not initiated into the various Yamba secret cults. ‘They see any juju for nothing’. This means that twins do not pay initiation fees like ordinary men do in order to be shown the sacra of secret cults and to participate in their activities. They may even eat of fowls which are eaten, for example, only by the head of the ipwantap society. They do so with impunity.

Should a twin in childhood die, people must not cry (‘they may cry only a little’), otherwise the remaining one will join his twin and also die. When people cry, he will feel that they loved his twin more than they loved him and, out of anger and resentment, follow him. A twin is buried like any other child and there is no mock burial for the surviving twin.36

Twins in childhood are believed to be able to transform into slowworms (mbumbur, mumu). This is given as a reason why parents of twins must not kill slowworms, or any snake for that matter. If they killed a snake, it would be as if they killed their own twin children.37

Neither are they allowed to eat snakes. The mother of twins has to observe a number of other food taboos. For example, she may not eat tadpoles (bi) or mudfish (ggo). There are also some herbs used as vegetables which she must not eat. Some of these plants when cooked turn into a kind of slippery gelatinous substance. In general, one can say that the mabi must avoid eating any food that is considered to be ‘weak’. She would pass this ‘weak’ food on to the twins through her mother’s milk and the twins would not grow strong. This is also the reason why twin parents have to be treated (b‘Nse) by the ritual specialist of twins before they may eat newly harvested crops. New crops are not yet matured enough and so are considered to be ‘weak’ food.

Again the mabi may not drink from another’s drinking cup nor may she give her cup to another person to drink from. This, they say, is done as a precaution. The person to whom she gives the cup may have eaten food which is taboo for her. Drinking later on from her — now ‘contaminated’ — cup would be as if she had eaten of the taboo food herself. The twin mother must keep all these taboos till the fence which was erected in front of her house is broken down. This takes place when the twins start to walk.

36. In Bali, when a twin died in infancy, he was taken far away to the bush and placed sitting on a stone with a stone prop, the bearers running back quickly and not looking back (Chilver 1994: 11).

37. The slowworm (Anguis fragilis) is described as nyuywan (spirit [of] child) in Nso’, and is surrounded by ritual. It occurs as a decorative motif in the stone and pebble floors, which used to be found in the palace at Kimbo’ before the fire in 1959 (p.c. E.M. Chilver).
People must take great care when dealing with twins. If twins show discontent, first one should try to pacify them; otherwise one’s undertakings will be fruitless. One informant told me, ‘If you want to go to the market and the twins follow you crying, give each of them five francs so that they are content and go back to the house, otherwise you will come back from the market with all your things unsold.’

At compound or lineage meetings one must heed the advice of (adult) twins. To ignore them is to invite trouble. According to Monday Kongnjo of Gom, ‘It is God who is telling them in their “belly” what they should say to people.’ It is as if God were speaking through them. People who ignore twins do so at their peril. This is why twins are respected like chiefs, even like ‘gods’. When I asked Pa Monday why twins are like ‘gods’, he said, ‘If they were not like gods, why did he (God) join the two of them in their mother’s womb when all other children are born single?’ It is the fact that two children are born of the same womb at the same time that puzzles the Yamba. It is somehow felt as a contradiction. The birth of twins is an event out of the ordinary.

In several Grassfield chiefdoms an affinity between chiefs and twins has been reported. Among the Yamba this is not the case. But this is not surprising since chieftaincy in Yamba, as it is now known, is a recent development going back to German and British colonial times. Retainers were unknown among the Yamba and the chief had to marry his wives just like any other man. The only identification made by some informants between chiefs and twins is to say that twins are ‘like chiefs’.

It is interesting to note that Yamba belief puts children born by breech delivery (we’mambuin, ndiŋ mbuin) and those who cut the upper teeth first (to nzog matsoŋ, to zoŋ tsatsaoŋ) into the same category as twins. Essentially the same ritual, although with some modifications, is performed for them. When asked why these children are considered the same as twins, informants usually replied, ‘That’s what we have been told by our ancestors.’ David Tangiri of Nkot was more helpful. According to him breech deliveries and children who cut the upper teeth first are actually ‘potential’ twins. They should have been twins but somehow it did not turn out that way. Such children may themselves become parents of twins.

Twins are given special names. Male twins are called Taku (firstborn) and Bibi, and female twins Gonfes (firstborn) and Kuku. These are the most common names, but there seem to be some variations. When the twins go to school, they will add one or two other names, one a Christian and the other
the father’s name. The two latter names usually appear in official documents. The child following twins is also given a special name. If he is a boy he will be called Bunwi, if a girl Gwanwi.

Finally, a word about the necessity of performing the twin ritual and what, according to Yamba belief, would happen if it were ignored. Informants stressed that failure to perform the twin ritual would result in supernatural sanctions. The affliction is believed to come from the twins themselves. Yamba believe that the twins themselves ‘insist’ on the performance of the ritual. As one of my informants told me, ‘If the father of twins fails to have the ritual performed the twins may “enter” their parents and afflict them.’ Either the taabi or the mabi may become mentally deranged or one of the twins may go mad. This is the only occasion I have come across on which twins can harm their parents. They do so in self-defence, as it were, to force the father to have them undergo the twin ritual which is held to be a powerful medicine which honours and protects them.

The Yamba Twin Ritual

The Yamba twin ritual is a complex whole consisting of a number of rites and episodes. Some of the rites are jointly performed on one day while others take place on different days later on. The twin ritual is brought to a final conclusion when the fence, erected in front of the twin mother’s house, is broken down (sa’ fe). This takes place about one year after the birth of twins.

Some preliminary points should be borne in mind: firstly, there are a number of regional differences in the actual performance of the twin ritual, especially between Lower and Upper Yamba. Since I have observed part of the twin ritual in Mfe (Upper Yamba), I shall base my descriptions on the practice there. Secondly, some of the rites or episodes are not specific to twins only. They are performed for all children, twin or single, the only difference being that for twins they must be performed by the ritual specialist for twins (ngga ncap fes). Thirdly, it would be wrong to assume that the Yamba twin ritual has not undergone changes in the past and especially since the 1960s. The material presented here refers to the situation recalled by my informants which occurred some forty years ago. But from what I have observed in January and August 1994, and from the statements of my informants I can say that the main components of the twin ritual are all still in place. I noticed that some of the episodes (for example, the erection of the fence) have been widely dropped and, that some ritual specialists who are Christians have adapted their ritual statements and some ritual actions so that they are in line
with their Christian faith. To go into this rather fascinating subject is beyond the scope of this chapter.

From the accounts of informants it is possible to deduce a certain sequence and form of the Yamba twin ritual. But somebody with a tidy mind may soon get frustrated when trying to establish the ‘ideal’ order or sequence of events. However, even if the ritual specialist does not follow a strict code of practice, there is no doubt that he is aware of a certain structure. In the description which follows I try to set out the sequence of events as they were presented to me by the majority of informants. This gives coherence to the succession of the different rites and makes it easier for the reader to follow.

4.1. Preliminary

At the news that twins have been born the father of the twins (taabi) brings out the drums and all the people of the compound begin to sing and dance. They not only sing ‘songs connected with Soh’ (a juju masquerade) as Buinda (1987: 76) mentions but any dancing song known to Yamba, be they juju dances like so’ or garu, seasonal dances like nga’ggwu, cam, or bubak, the marriage dance tajo’, or the women’s dances matitik and ndehndeh. No masker appears and the special musical instruments are not used. Only the dances take place and the songs associated with them. I was told that people ‘sing and dance any kind dances’ because they want to show their happiness and joy that twins have been born.

Following the birth of twins, the taabi starts to prepare for the first part of the twin ritual. The Yamba twin ritual is a very costly affair. For each rite a number of things have to be given out such as spears, fowls, and calabashes of palm wine. Also food has to be prepared. Thus it may take several weeks or even months before the taabi is ready to call the specialist to come and ‘fix’ the twins.

4.2. Formal Invitation to Ritual Specialist

The evening before the ritual the taabi and the people of his compound proceed to the compound of the specialist, singing and dancing all the way (sam, samda, ‘running’ dance, as opposed to the normal way of dancing which is done in a circle). The specialist has been informed of their coming and has prepared food and palm wine to welcome them. When the party arrives they are feasted. The specialist is formally invited to come and ‘fix’ the twins. He enters his house and returns with the medicine bag (bam ncep fes) which he then hangs on the outside wall of the house next to the door. Before their
departure the party is given a cock. They return to their compound, again singing and dancing. The dance continues throughout the night (noŋ ŋka’ — ‘sleep’ dance, feast).

The dance through the village (sam, samda) by the members of the twin father’s family serves as notice to all people that the following day when the ritual is performed must be observed as a rest day. The whole quarter (in Mfe the whole village) must abstain from farm work. As to the day when the ritual may be performed, one ritual specialist told me that it may take place on any day of the eight-day Yamba week except on ‘Country Sunday’ (ntelak), the traditional rest day of the Yamba.

As for the reason why the ṣiga ncəp fes hangs the medicine bag on the outside wall of his house one informant said that by doing so he indicates that ‘he has gone already’, in other words, it is a sign that he has accepted the invitation and ‘is already on his way’. This medicine bag (bam ncəp fes) contains a number of things. Pa Njikwi of Mfe showed me the contents of his bag. There were pieces of bones of such ‘strong’ animals as the lion, leopard, elephant, hippopotamus, chimpanzee, and others; the hoof of a buffalo and of an antelope (sitatunga, Tragelaphus specei); two red duiker horns (ndo tsə), and pieces of wood of some hardwood trees (sa’, kokop, mfuəm, and li, the red ironwood tree). The bag also contained a round grinding stone of the size of a man’s fist and a small bundle of tally sticks. As for the pieces of wood, Pa Njikwi told me that they had to be collected east of the place where the specialist lives.

4.3 The Collection of ‘Medicine’ (fu ncəp)

Early on the morning of the day of the ritual the specialist goes to the bush to collect the plants which he needs for the different rites. Every rite requires some ‘leaves’. The specialist cuts two of each kind. I was shown all the plants used in the Yamba twin ritual by Pa Njikwi for the fee which an apprentice would have to pay. As part of the fee I had to give a spear which he used to point out the plants to me. It is of note that I was given no explanation as to the symbolic properties of the plants. I was only told their names in Yamba and for which particular rite they were used.

4.4. The Arrival of the Specialist at the Twins’ Compound

Having collected the ‘medicine’ the specialist takes his medicine bag (bam ncəp fes) and the ‘twin pot’ (kuŋ fes), a small earthenware pot with two compartments, and goes to the twins’ compound. He is accompanied by some
members of his lineage. When they arrive at the nearest junction leading to the compound, they sit down. The taabi and some of his people come to meet them there. They bring two spears, two small calabashes of palm wine, two small dishes of meat, and two small baskets of fufu (pounded cocoyams). The meat is put in the twin pot. The specialist and his party eat the food and the palm wine is shared by all. Then they enter the compound. The same items as those mentioned above are again given to the ngga ncap fes at their arrival in the compound. Informants stressed that of all things given there must be two of each kind. I was told that this had to be so because ‘twins were two’.

Illustration 3: the ritual specialist (ngga ncap fes) and his party arrive at the twin’s compound

4.5 Locking the Entrance to the Compound (lok maandzɔ)

Next the ngga ncap fes proceeds to ‘lock’ all the paths leading to the compound by placing a plant, called lilik, across them. This plant is a thick, fleshy climber, leathery to the touch. The stem is like a thick rope along which there are three rows of ‘wings’ the whole length of the plant. A piece of lilik feels like a rubber truncheon when held in one’s hand. This apotropaic device is said to prevent witches and persons with evil intent from entering the compound during the ritual and after. A truncheon perfectly expresses the apotropaic property of the lilik plant.
After having locked the entrances to the compound the specialist sits down in the yard. He places the bundle of leaves, the medicine bag, and the twin pot in front of him. Then he removes his drinking cup and fills it with wine and sprays it three times over the things in front of him. Some female dependents (njé’gu) of the specialist’s lineage who usually accompany him do the same. This, I was told, was to ‘bless’ the twin pot, the herbs, and the medicine bag, which were going to be used in the ritual. I have mentioned elsewhere (see Chapter Two) the beneficial role the nje’gu play in the life of the lineage.

Next the twin pot and the medicine bag are placed in a carrying basket which one of the njé’gu puts on her back. The specialist holding the bundle of herbs over his shoulder now enters the house of the twins, followed by the girl carrying the basket and the rest of the party in a single file. Pa Njikwi told me that he must first greet the twins and their mother before he can ‘make the medicine’.

Illustration 4: Twin ritual paraphernalia: the medicine bag (bam ncōp fēs), the bundle of herbs (fu ncōp fēs), and the twin pot (ŋkuŋ fēs)

4.6. Hanging up laŋ

Having ‘locked’ all the entrances to the compound the ritual specialist must still protect the twins against invisible forces of a harmful character coming through the air. He ties two hands of a fern called laŋ and two feathers of a
fowl to the top of a long raffia pole, which he sticks into the ground next to the
door of the twin mother’s house. As payment the taabi has to give a fowl and
a small calabash of palm wine. Explanations vary as to what the làŋ is sup-
posed to do.

Some informants say that it is simply a device to prevent rain from falling
on the day of the ritual. I have been told that làŋ is used to ‘hold rain’ in other
contexts, too. When I asked whether the làŋ is hung up also in the dry season
when there is no danger of rain, all informants emphatically stated that it was
a must (‘na law!’). From this we have to conclude that the làŋ is more than
just a device to prevent rain from falling. Nsangong of Mfe said that the làŋ
prevents strong winds from passing over the compound, that it makes the
compound ‘cool’. But most informants insist that the làŋ is hung up to protect
the twins from airborne witches and ‘bad spirits’ that want to harm the twins.

Illustration 5: Hanging up làŋ: the ritual specialist ‘blesses’ the làŋ with palm
wine before tying it to the top of a bamboo pole

4.7. To ‘Cover’ the Twins (fo’mven, fopkə moa)

As I have indicated already, it is widely believed that twins, including breech
deliveries and children who cut the upper teeth first, are born with ‘two eyes’
(lis baa). They are able to see things which ordinary people do not see. This
puts them in great danger especially in their infancy. So the first task of the
ŋga ncəp fəs is to ‘cover’ the twins (fo’ mven, fopkə moa), in other words, to
‘lock’ their second sight. This ritual is not limited to twins. There are other children for whom fo’ mven has to be performed besides those mentioned above. Children born with the umbilical cord wrapped around their neck or body (lim toj), or with a caul (te tam), must be treated in the same way. All these children are believed to have ‘two eyes’ and they have their own ritual specialist to ‘cover’ them. Some informants even told me that the ritual fo’ mven is performed for any child as a matter of precaution. One never knows whether a child is born with ‘two eyes’ or not.

The rite fo’ mven takes place in the house where the twins are staying. Only the taabi, the mabi, the twins, and the ritual specialist with one or two attendants are allowed to be present. The twin father has to provide a spear, a fowl, and a small calabash of palm wine. The rite consists of five parts:

1. the placing of barrier medicine across the threshold (ntaatse nzok)
2. the ‘covering’ of the twins
3. the administering of strengthening medicine to the twins and their parents
4. an omen-taking ritual
5. the drinking of worm-cast

The twin parents enter the house and the specialist closes the door on them. He places a number of plants across the threshold securing them on both sides with forked sticks stuck into the ground. In Mfe I saw two plants placed across the threshold, viz. lilik and ggwei. These plants placed across the threshold are believed to protect the twins and their mother inside the house. They are directed against witches and persons of evil intent. In Lower Yamba, in normal circumstances, that is with single children, the lineage head, who is also the head of its gwantap society, places the ntaatse at the door of the newly born child of the lineage. But since he has ‘strong medicine on his body’, he may not come near twins. Only a nga ncap fex may do so for twins. Having placed the ntaatse across the threshold the specialist opens the door. On entering he is given a fowl and a calabash of palm wine. Also a calabash bowl of water is brought which had to be filled to the brim. Next he takes the horn of a red duiker (ndo tsvo). He fills it with wine and gives it to the mabi to drink. He fills the horn again and touches the lips of the twins moistening them. Finally, he gives the horn to the taabi to drink. Now the specialist goes to the twin mother’s bed facing the foot-end of the bed. He takes the firstborn twin and sprays a mouthful of water, then a mouthful of palm wine on the child’s face. Holding the twin on his left arm he places a cocoyam leaf tightly over its face. Then he lowers the child, head downwards, till it is in an upside-down position. Opening the mat which is lying on the bed with his