

# Kapsiki beer dynamics

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Beer not only is a central feature of Sub-Saharan daily life in non-Moslem societies, it often has a high symbolic content as well<sup>1</sup>. Here we shall trace the symbolic aspects of indigenous beer among the Kapsiki/Higi of North Cameroon and North-Eastern Nigeria<sup>2</sup>, by interpreting the symbolic connotations from its place in community rituals. As we shall see, “the message of beer” is by no means uniform. Though most of the symbolism around beer is a male dominated discourse which concentrates on bonding and power<sup>3</sup>, the symbolism is less straightforward and more hidden<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The last years have seen an increased interest in the economies of brewing, for several reasons. First, the micro-economics of beer production fits in with a general interest in the informal economy (Colson & Scudder 1988, McAllister 1993, Saul 1981, Seignobos 1976, Tellegen 1997a, 1997b, Willis 2002). Secondly, beer brewing is usually women's business, and its dynamics influence the gender relations in African societies (Brolsma 1987, Delaude *e.a.* 1993, Hell 1982, Jolly 1995, Rekdal 1996, Abbink 2002, Pietilä 2002).

<sup>2</sup> The joint name is appropriate as the group lives on both sides of the border between Cameroon and Nigeria. In Cameroon they are called 'Kapsiki' and in Nigeria 'Higi'. For brevity's sake, I shall call the whole group 'Kapsiki' in this chapter. Fieldwork was carried out in 1971, 1972-1973, 1978, 1984, 1989, 1994 and 1999, financed mainly by the WOTRO foundation, Utrecht University and the African Studies Centre.

<sup>3</sup> The Kapsiki beer discourse of men is quite analogue to the Mafa symbolism (Müller-Kosack 2001, p. 112), the female counterpart is quite different.

<sup>4</sup> True to their calling, anthropologists have since long concentrated on this monitor function of beer: both as an expression of social relations and as a source of societal dynamics: McNetting 1964, Eguchi 1975, Karp 1980, Hell 1982, Douglas 1987, Carlson 1990, Jolly 1995, Willis 2001, Abbink 2002, Müller-Kosack 2001, Trouwborst 1970, Mc Metting, 1964.

## I The Context

The Kapsiki in North Cameroon live in a dry Sahelian savannah environment, where sedentary cultivation of millet, sorghum and maize can still be supplemented with some husbandry: sheep, goats and cattle. It is a mountainous, relatively densely populated and quite intensively cultivated area. Cultivation technology is of the classical African iron-type and working units are small. Subsistence cultivation relies on a broad spectrum of food crops, with some cash crops to supplement the family budget. The Kapsiki have lived in their area at least three centuries.

For safety purposes people formerly built their villages only on defensible spots and cleared fields in the immediate vicinity. The fields of the Kapsiki/Higi were situated around the outcroppings or on the slopes themselves (van Beek 1987)<sup>5</sup>. This picture changed dramatically with the coming of colonisation. The *pax colonialis* of the Germans (later the French) and British for the Kapsiki opened up the plains and plateau as cultivation areas. This pacification resulted in a rapid dispersal of the population over the formerly dangerous out-fields.

The main, if not the only, socio-political unit consists of the village. Kapsiki village communities have always had a high degree of political autonomy, as they have their own clearly defined borders, authority structures and local histories, in which migration traditions dominate. Politics are not centralised. Village heads have just a few ritual obligations, as have the clan and lineage elders, though their influence in daily life can be larger. Conflict resolution, for instance, is highly informal, not dependent on specific functionaries, though one separate group of specialists does exist: the blacksmiths. Religion is complex and echoes their history and setting. A system of major cyclic rituals, more or less tied in to the *rites de passage* joins a clearly defined set of sacrificial cults, which follow the social echelons of the village: individual, household, ward,

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<sup>5</sup> As often, such a situation leads to a very photogenic landscape (van Beek, 2003).

lineage, clan, village neighbourhood and the whole village<sup>6</sup>. Sacrifice functions as the central ritual, with crab divination as a steering mechanism, both processes allowing but a limited role for the ancestors. Kapsiki society is both village and compound based, with a clear separation between the private and the public spheres, as the Kapsiki tend to value the privacy of their walled-in compounds. On the other hand, the relation within and between villages are never easy, as old enmities abound, which can flare after a market brawl or a wife who chooses a new husband in another village. Women tend to move frequently from husband to husband (van Beek 1987) and between villages, so the relation between the genders often is tense. For the men the high risk of a wife disappearing overnight, and for the women the high child mortality that long has characterised Kapsiki demography (van Beek 1987) resulted in a low trust between the genders, and consequently in a tendency for men and women to operate in their own separate spheres and create their own arenas. Beer is one issue where the men and women traditionally moved in separate fields, but where the divides between those fields are eroding.

## Red and white: Male and Female Beer

Two kinds of beer dominate Kapsiki brewing, **tè** and **mpedli**. The first, **tè**, is the ritual beer, the 'red' kind of beer that will be my focus here. **Mpedli**, the 'white' beer is for market use and immediate consumption. The two represent polar opposites : the white beer is brewed by women, has no ritual significance, is made by a quick process and has to be consumed immediately. The brewing procedure is relatively simple (Brolsma, 1987). The white **mpedli** beer is

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<sup>6</sup> In this respect the difference between the Kapsiki and their Eastern neighbours, the Mofu-Diamare is marked: the small "principautés" such as found among the Mofu (Vincent 1990) are very different from the more acephalic Kapsiki. On that issue, as on many others, the Southern neighbours of the Kapsiki, such as the Bana and the Hina, and to some extent the Mada, are culturally much closer (Guignet 1968, Eguchi 1975).

considered a new variety, adapted to the exigencies of the local market because of its quick preparation<sup>7</sup>. In recent years the red tè beer has increasingly become a sales commodity for women both at the village markets and in the cities, generally preferred by the men over mpedli<sup>8</sup>.

However, the red variety is traditionally a man's brew, following a strict procedure, with numerous prohibitions, and used for ritual purposes. Symbolism is focused on this beer rather than on the mpedli, and it is this beer that gives the Kapsiki their name: 'Kapsiki' stems from the verb *psekè*, meaning to sprout.

The recipe for red beer is essentially the same throughout the Cameroonian north (Eguchi, 1975 ; Teeuwen, 1985 ; Delaude *et al.*, 1993). The millet or sorghum grains (the Kapsiki like both but prefer sorghum) are soaked in water for a night and then left for some days to germinate in a dark hut. After some days they are left on the roof to dry and blacken in the sun, as *tè njine*. Closely linked to death and danger, in Kapsiki thought, this intermediate stage of the sprouts is considered vulnerable to supernatural attack, so they will not be left too long on the roof. If small quantities of beer are to be made, the sprouts are left to dry inside the brewing hut, covered with a cloth. About four days before the event, the blackened dry sprouts are ground, then soaked again for half a day in a full jar of water and cooked for the first time for several hours. Traditionally a large earthenware brewing pot (*wuta*) is used, but also steel barrels or cast-iron cooking pots may serve the same purpose. In the afternoon, when the mixture has cooled down, the clear part is ladled into other smaller jars standing against the brewery wall. The remaining murky part is cooked again until the evening and is then mixed with the rest of the brew in the other jars to cool. The male brewer waits during the night, tasting the brew until it turns slightly sour, then filters it back into the large *wuta*, and lights up the fire around the large *wuta* jar (which is fixed in the earth) or under the

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<sup>7</sup> Beer brewing brings in a steady income for women of about CFA 1,000 per standard batch. Their total production is limited by their sales network, the size of their pots and fireplaces and the fact that the beer does not keep well (c.f. Tellegen 1997 b).

<sup>8</sup> Recently the idea of the nutritional value of beer has been taken seriously, a point usually more claimed by the drinkers themselves than by "serious scholars": de Garine 1976, Fabre-Varras 1989, Chrétien 1991, Delaude *e.a.* 1993.

drum. A slow fire is kept burning for the whole night until the next afternoon. The beer now turns sweetish (**tè kwarhèni**). In the evening, the man filters the beer for a second time and cautiously pours the brew into a number of narrow-necked beer jars, **rhewepe tè** (spilling is a bad thing at this moment), and shuts them with a bundle of leaves. The jars are left in the brewery. If no yeast is added, it takes three days for the beer to ferment. The residue used to be thrown away but today is used as garden manure or pig food.

One taboo dominates ritual beer brewing. If the brewer has sexual intercourse, the beer becomes gluey and unfit for drinking. At the end of the second day, the beer may be used for sacrifice. Called **sarerhè** (literally: the blacksmith drinks), blacksmiths do indeed drink it and use it for household sacrifices when officiating (van Beek 1992). On the third day it is ready to be used both for sacrifices and for the public drinking that accompanies large offerings. The whole process of brewing has been performed in a hut specifically built for brewing tè. In Kapsiki architecture, this hut, as a strictly male domain, is usually built into the compound wall, opposite from the entrance.

Since the early 1980s, women in the cities of North Cameroon have taken up brewing red beer for sale (Teeuwen 1985). Kapsiki women have also tried their hand at red beer as it gets a better price at the market than mpedli. They brew at home and, depending on their relationship with their husband, will either use the brewery or install their beer battery outside. Grain for commercial beer production, as is the case for mpedli, is kept separate. The women keep their own stocks and do not use the main granary for their grain supply.

In recent years the women have changed the brewing process. In the first place, they have shortened the fermentation period. Instead of pouring the brew into the rhewepe tè, they use open pots and plastic buckets for easier transportation and distribution. The night before market day, they put yeast in a small jar. When that batch is thoroughly fermented, it is distributed over the rest of the cooled brew. Secondly, the women have shortened the first part of the process: they soak the ground sprouts for only an hour before the first cooking. After some experimentation, they have found that this makes for easier cooking and also improves the taste: its higher sugar content seems to elevate the alcohol percentage and makes for

a softer, rounded taste. As one female informant put it: “The old people did not know it very well”, meaning, of course, the men. So, the women have shortened the process from five to three days and they appear to take the taste of the brew into account more than the men do. For them, the main difference with brewing mpedli is the length of the cooking: for a batch of red beer they need wood for CFA 1 000, (Euro 1,50) while white beer takes firewood worth CFA 300. But it still makes economic sense for women: on a 80-100 litre brew of red beer, a woman earns about CFA 1 500-2 000 and for a similar amount of mpedli she accrues a profit of CFA 1 000 (at 1999 prices). Finally, women are experimenting with the grains themselves. Now that maize has become abundant, they mix sorghum and maize sprouts in the *tè njine*, having found out that maize makes the taste lighter and increases fermentation.

These changes affect the gender division of brewing: women brew mpedli (though much less) as well as *tè* for the market. For the main rituals, such as the boys' and girls' initiation, the man still is the brewer. Especially for a girl's first marriage (*makwa*), our opening case, the old recipe is followed. One reason is that the ritual follows the pattern of traditional beer brewing: the days of the ritual are named after the brewing phases. Even when the man has to brew large quantities, he will call his lineage brothers for help, not his wives. If he needs more beer during the feast, he will use the shorter process to add quantity. The gender division, in short, has altered but has not disappeared: male brewing is aimed at ritual, market brewing is for women, even if both can brew red beer nowadays.

## Beer and Kapsiki Ritual

It is in the three major rituals complexes – weddings, funerals and sacrifices – that the meaning of beer stands out. First we shall trace the way of the beer during a wedding in order to gain some impression of the Kapsiki handling of beer in a ritual, by giving an ethnographical pastiche, *i.e.* part of a traditional wedding ceremony at the



■ Picture 1  
Mother and drinking child at Mogodé market.

first marriage of a girl (makwa)<sup>9</sup>. Then we shall have a quick overview of the role of beer in other rituals.

*Mogodé, 14 April 1986, 4.00 am.*

In the afternoon of the first full day of her wedding, Kuve Kwanyé<sup>10</sup>, Zra's bride, awaits the "blessing of the bride". About 3 p.m., a group of the groom's maternal uncles plus some of their friends and the village chief gather at the back of the compound, hidden from the eyes of outsiders. Zra, the groom, pours beer from his sacrificial jar into the ritual calabash, and hands it to the village headman. At last, people fall silent when he pronounces a blessing over it: "She has to bear girls, first one and then another one. We give beer to the people who are dead. If anybody wants to harm, let him be restrained. Let the groom marry more women and all be healthy." He then spills the beer over the floor. The groom fills the calabash for the second time and hands it over to his mother's brothers, who spit in the beer while passing it on. One of them then takes the calabash to the nearby hut of the bride. Clothed just in her iron apron, Kuve kneels on the doorstep of her hut for the blessing. The uncle takes a mouthful of beer and sprinkles it over the kneeling girl: "You must be healthy, you should bear many children and repay the bride price. You have to bear children one after the other." Again he douses the girl with beer, and repeats his blessing: "Please bear your children, not one by one, but one after the other." Then he hands her the calabash: she has to empty it, drinking a part, and letting the rest run over her body. When the bride's body is wholly washed with beer, the men are satisfied. She is now their nephew's. Though much of the ritual is still to follow, from this moment Kuve is considered as belonging to the house, truly married to Zra, a wife of the lineage.

Later during the boys initiation, **gewela**, and the conclusion of the whole complex of girls marriage and boys' initiation during the **la** harvest festival, the rhythm of beer brewing serves as the main format for the festivities. Not only are the days of initiation, and the days of the **la** harvest rites named after the brewing phases, but also

<sup>9</sup> The distinction between the first marriage of a girl and the consecutive marriages of a run-away bride is highly significant in Kapsiki social life (van Beek 1987)

<sup>10</sup> The names are fictive and just follow the habitual custom of birth order names in Kapsiki (van Beek 2002).

all activities on these days have to fit in with the exigencies of the brewing process. Without going into too much detail: in all phases of initiation the use of red beer as a means for blessing, for ritual invocation and for bonding during the joyful and boisterous festivities is marked.

A clear example of this is in another yearly ritual, rain making. Again, beer is crucial in the ritual to procure rain (van Beek, 1997), as it is used to 'wash' the sacred objects of rain-making sites, too. During the rain hunt of Mogodé several old grinding stones, attributed to rainmakers of old times, are washed with tè, blessings and invocations are mediated by beer and the "rain chasers" have to drink deeply and well. Where rainmakers still operate – as is the case in some Kapsiki villages – their implements, stones and mortars are washed with beer, and also they cannot operate without a fair amount of libation. Without beer there will be no rain; of course, the reverse holds as well.

As often in African societies, funeral rites among the Kapsiki are complex and very expressive. As death comes unannounced, the many guests at the first two days of funeral proceedings are well received with white beer, the quick kind. But during the proper burial, on the third day, people have had time to brew the ritual beer, and there the function of the red beer is prominent. Three moments stand out in the long series of dances and farewells. First, the main officiators at Kapsiki funerals are the blacksmiths: they are the ones who adorn the body, who perform the drumming for the dance, dance with the corpse and supervise the digging of the grave; finally at the end of three hectic days they bury the deceased in the tomb. Their control of the proceedings is expressed by beer: after adorning the body for its last showing, they have an internal drinking session, of – obviously – red beer. Seated at the point of honor in the compound – a space usually forbidden for them – they take their time with the ample supply of beer the family of the deceased has furnished. Drinking at their leisure in the face of a fully adorned, waiting, often sweaty crowd of mourners (*i.e.* non-smiths) they are conspicuously slow. The message during this intermezzo often is clear: "We are in charge now, despite the fact that normally we are considered non-persons in the village".

The second moment is the first farewell, after the last dance with the corpse, when the crowd of mourners has petered out, and the sun is

approaching the horizon. Just before the corpse is taken to the tomb, the chief blacksmith on behalf of the deceased douses the next of kin with red beer, while stating that the dances were good and the dead man would behave. With the words "Go, I have been well mourned, well danced for and I will not be jealous" the blacksmith separates the mourners from the mourned.

After the first funeral rites, when the harvest is completed, the burial mound is finished and the next of kin gather for a final farewell. Central is the old beer jar of the deceased and his successor's, often his son, new sacrificial jar. Made to order by a woman blacksmith after the death of the brewer's father, the new sacrificial jar, filled with beer, has rested on the father's grave for a whole night during the rites of the second funeral. There, too, the blacksmith takes a large sip of beer – this time a special mix of *tè* and ritual food – and sprinkles the family standing at the foot of the burial mound. Using almost the same words, assuring the mourners that now all is well, they are sent home in a ceremony that mirrors the proceeding of the burial itself. When almost all have left, the sacrificial jar of the deceased is smashed and left behind on the mound; the new beer jar, which from now on will represent the deceased, is installed in the son's compound, to serve as *melè*, his personal altar, a beer jar henceforth to be addressed as *yita*, father.

Not only the high times of weddings and funerals call for beer, but the standard sacrifice in the compound also depends on red beer. Any sacrifice involving a goat or a sheep, *i.e.* any familial or village sacrifice of some importance, calls for the male brew. The *tè* is poured out in an oblong sacrificial cup made of blackened earthenware and sprinkled on the altar as one of the final parts of the proceedings. The altar, in fact, is the beer jar mentioned above. Addressing the jar with beer as 'father', the son puts it in the middle of his compound. He calls in his wives and children, and they all drink, the man first, then the women and finally the children. The jar will remain stored under one of the brewer's granaries, shut with a cow's horn. For each sacrifice it will be filled, together with the normal beer jars. During the sacrifice the *melè* is the centre of attention: some blood, a small piece of liver and cooked mush will be smeared on it "to have father eat", and the first beer to be tasted both by the jar and the main officiates is poured from this very *melè*, the



Picture 2  
The sacrificial jar of the village.



Picture 3  
Beer ritual at the funeral mound.

sacrificial jar that represents the deceased father of the compound owner.

Thus, any offering involving tè is part of a larger social matrix. The final drinking is quite formal. In the early morning ward members, clansmen and friends gather in the forecourt of the house, responding to the whispered invitation of the evening before. Standing in the house's entrance, the brewer then starts to explain why he has called them. He conveys his message in elliptical language, just hinting at the real cause: "I had a dream, and put some grains in the water afterwards". The dream points to the divination he has sought, often a series of consultations, grains in the water represent the brewing process. As most already know why he is sacrificing, no further explanation is needed and his use of encoded speech is a sign of his maturity and "*savoir faire*".

Beer drinking is the high point of the sacrifice and the most social aspect of the ritual. All the other activities, killing and roasting the goat and cooking the meal, have already been done in strict privacy behind the high compound wall that shields the family from the view of outsiders. Throughout the day of the actual sacrifice, the hut's entrance will be barricaded by a wooden pole to signal that a sacrifice is in process. Anyone entering would do so at his peril for it is dangerous for an outsider, i.e. someone not closely related, to enter the compound during a sacrifice. The drinking guests do not enter; they stay in the forecourt situated outside the compound proper, just in front of the one and only entrance.

This type of sacrifice, immolating a goat, followed by a meal for a small in-group, and beer for a large gathering of outsiders, is standard in Kapsiki culture. Not only households, but also wards, lineages, clans and even the village as a whole follow this sacrificial pattern. Beer is not always brewed for the occasion, but it is always poured on the altar, and in most cases drunk. Attendance at the final drinking session of a village sacrifice, though, is restricted. This particular sacrifice is shrouded in privacy and some secrecy. People are obliged to stay at home and not work in their fields, while the elders of the major clans accompany the village chief and the chief's blacksmith up the mountain to make a sacrifice at the ruins of the ancestral abode of the village.

## Male bonding, fertility and power

Beer is liminal liquid. Not only does brewing demands an inordinate amount of time, but more important, it is only done – at least if men brew – in a very elaborate way. Characteristically, not only is the brewery one of the focal points of the lay out of the compound, the brewing process itself is loaded with taboos; thus, sexual intercourse is taboo during those days and nights, one of the very few prohibitions on sex in Kapsiki life. Nor may any stranger enter the compound – and surely not the brewing hut – during the process. Indeed, beer is a central symbol. The first meaning is male bonding, stressing the unity of the patrilineage. Beer unites people, defining them as lineage members while distinguishing them from other similar individuals and groups. In sacrifice it socialises the private ritual of sacrifice, in the wedding it joins the bride to her in-laws. Beer marks the final separation between a widow and her deceased husband, just as it separates the kinsmen from the tomb at the second burial. Thus, it is primarily a symbol for social bonding, both of the living and the dead, and for the transference of social obligations. Most of the bonding in the rites of passage has to do with lineage unity and membership of it or association with it.

The symbolism attached to red beer is unmistakably male. Brewed by men, tè is the link between the generations of a lineage through the melè, which represents the late father. Tè separates the son from the corpse of his deceased father and at a later stage reunites him with his deceased relative. Pouring beer expresses the permanence and strength of the agnatic line, its procreative powers and male authority. Sprinkling with beer generates membership of the lineage, either welcoming in new affiliates or taking a farewell from old members. The brewer of red beer is the one who is rooted, who has the rights and duties belonging to him as an inalienable villager. As part of the lineage that owns the land, his family should generate crops and children. Beer demarcates the processes that generate continuity for the lineage group, focusing on the man as part of a larger group of men. So the relation between beer and lineage unity is clear: new people are added to the lineage through beer, while beer helps with a formal farewell of parting members. In the fune-

ral proceedings, the blacksmith acts as stand-in for the deceased and effectuates the severance of the dead person from the ranks of the living lineage. The final farewell at the burial mound is replete with beer and references to beer, and the continuity of the beer jar is the continuity of the house.

But the meaning of symbols depend on who uses them: one clear symbolic operation transforms this linear male meaning of beer into a more female meaning, that of fertility. First, the smooth ending of a life, and the absence of jealousy of the deceased versus the living, are prerequisites for fertility, essential for the future procreation of the lineage; any jealousy would severely jeopardise the continued fertility of his (grand)daughters and daughters-in-law. But it is even clearer in the wedding proceedings. During the wedding of Kuve Kwanye we saw that the groom's mother's brothers stressed the lineage affiliation of the bride: the groom's matrilineal kinsmen established the bride's bond with the patrilineage she was marrying into through beer, and this defined her progeny as belonging to their sister's son's lineage. In fact the father of the bride did just the reverse the night before.

On the eve of the wedding, the father gave a farewell blessing to his daughter, again with red beer, and for this we return to the wedding of bride Kuve :

*Mogodé, 13 April 1986*

The evening before her "blessing by beer", Kuve has been called by Zra's kinsmen at her parents' home. Before leaving, Kuve knelt in the house entrance, clad in an iron apron and wearing a straw cape over her head and torso. From his special calabash her father took a large sip of beer, and spat it over his daughter, soaking her with the liquid. He then gave his blessing-in-parting: "You are headstrong, my daughter, you do not listen. It is not like this that you should go to your husband. I have not laid my hand on you, but a husband is not a father. You are no longer in my house, but will dwell with many strangers. I want things to go well, I want you to become pregnant, and stay in that house till you die." Again he spat the beer over her and off she went, accompanied by an aunt, towards the house of her groom (van Beek, 1987).

Thus the bride's father severed his hold over his daughter, renounced on her fertility, showing that lineage matters are also matters of

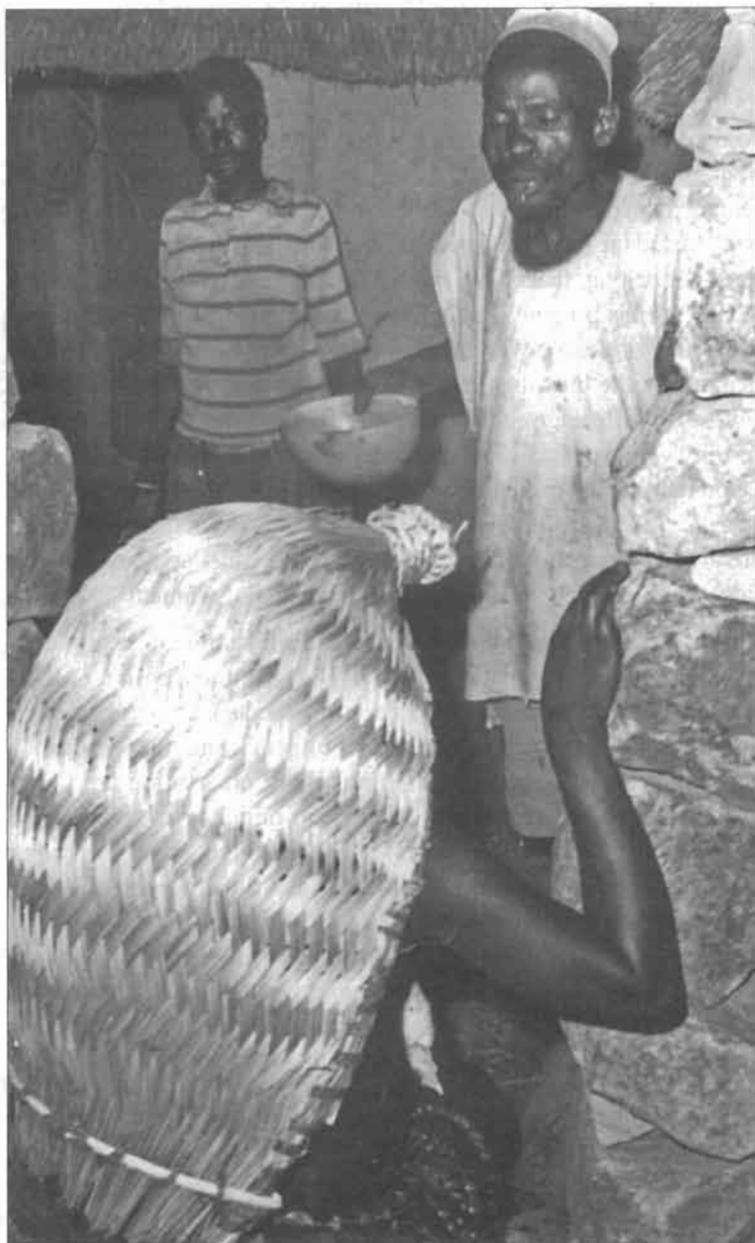
fertility. So when the lineage of wife givers and the lineage of the wife givers of the earlier generation (the groom's mother's) bless with beer, they redefine the continuity of the lineage into fertility for the bride; just as the groom's mother in fact perpetuated the lineage, so does the girl's first marriage in the future. Through blessings by non-agnatic kin, beer begets the meaning of fertility, generating new female affiliates to the **kayita** first of all, and then by blessing them with abundant fertility. Thus, the two lineages to which the groom does not belong, that of his mother and of his wife, work in tandem to procure his progeny through the pivotal element of the wedding, the young bride. Now it becomes clearer why intercourse is forbidden during the brewing process. The brewing of the red beer is the first stage of lineage fertility, and to mix this with the last stages of fertility would upset the normal order of things in two ways: it would be premature, but more importantly, it would be a false claim by one lineage to procure progeny on its own, as if it could ever be procreative without the other two relevant lines, just as it would be a false claim by men on the procreative powers of women<sup>11</sup>.

This lineage-based symbolic focus in Kapsiki culture of *tè* produces some additional connotations as well. Beer, for the Kapsiki, is associated with male power and procreation, aspects that merge through the involvement of the "mother's brothers" and the "in-laws". These aspects of power-*cum*-continuity and procreation are found in the association with rain. Though rain might seem to associate easily with fertility and procreation at first sight, it has a strong association with supernatural power. Rain ritual serves as a discourse on power relations (van Beek, 1997). Thus, the combination of power and fertility serves as a privileged link between man and the source of power, *i.e.* his supernatural world, mainly represented in the notion of **shala**. Red beer is what one offers to one's god, or to the collective supernatural world, indicated with the same word, **shala**.

The Kapsiki cosmology is quite personalised and hierarchical. Each and every person has his or her personal **shala**, the personal god who directs from above, whose acts one follows and who can be considered as a supernatural alter ego. However, in all gatherings of

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<sup>11</sup> A similar notion is to be found in Dogon beer brewing and ritual (Jolly 1995).



Picture 4  
Kuве is blessed by father Teri Beja  
as a farewell from her parental home.

people, especially when the lineage gathers, shala is used also to indicate the god of that lineage, which is at the same time a collection of all personal shala, as well as the one god for the whole collectivity. Thus, each compound, ward, lineage, clan or village has its own shala, just as they have special places and animals. This highly flexible notion is tied in with the various echelons of social life, and can serve as supernatural referent for any gathering of men and women. In principle shala is always addressed at a beer jar through red beer, in the privacy of a family, later to be broadened to a collective of kinsmen and interested friends. Usually beer accompanies a sacrifice, the immolated animal plus the beer being referred as food and drink. In the sacrifice the meat and other foodstuff (sorghum mush) is consumed privately, while the beer is intended to be drunk also with the larger circle of kinsmen and friends. As in marriage and burial, the beer conveys the blessings and power of the patrilineage, continuity, local roots, and links with the sacred places of the villages. Thus, beer is a vehicle of power, a symbol of any generative power that transcends the individual, a vehicle for being more than just a temporal private person.

Thus, the place of beer in the religion is revealing. In Kapsiki culture, beer stipulates the power of the lineage structure, the fertile co-operation between the genders, the complementary positions of opposites (lineage and in-laws, non-smith and smith) and the generative power in general. There is an additional aspect here, that of harmony. In Kapsiki culture beer symbolism stresses in some ways the antithesis of the normal situation. For the individualist, autarchy-oriented Kapsiki, the large rituals express the opposite of the daily reality, *i.e.* the continuity and power of the lineage, as well as the communality between house and ward, ward and village and between villagers and their enemies. As elsewhere in Kapsiki ritual, structure is portrayed as a harmonious whole. Beer symbolism, as an aspect of most of the major rituals, resolves societal contradictions, between the dead and the living, between man and woman, between this and the supernatural world: beer is *communitas* in Turner's terms (1974)<sup>12</sup>. In actual practice, the deeply rooted

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<sup>12</sup> The same has been said, of course, of alcohol consumption as such, be it in beer or otherwise. Its use and abuse have been the subject of a long and heated debate, between the partisans of "productive drinking" and alcohol as a facilitator of social relations, and those highlighting the

lineages as well as the relations between men and women are laced with tension (van Beek 1987); brothers, though defined as close kin and harmonious friends, often are at loggerheads with each other. Some violence is endemic in Kapsiki culture, and in fact alcohol often exacerbates this tension. Especially funerals form the arena where some of these conflicts are fought out. Still, despite its contribution to brawls, the symbolic content of beer irons out contradictions within Kapsiki society<sup>13</sup>. The symbol of beer serves as an inverted mirror of society. Its message contrasts with the main trends in this culture: the trend towards individualism in the Kapsiki is countered by a beer-induced ritual harmony; the tension between the genders is mediated by beer into a gentle inclusion of women in the patrilineage. Beer symbolism is a meta-commentary on society itself: beer highlights the fact that cultural premises cannot be taken too seriously and provides a way to reconstitute that kind of society that people wish they have.

One final word about the sharing of the beer arena by men and women. Women do brew a lot of beer, in fact most beer comes from women. At each market day cubic metres of beer are washed away by the men, brewed by women, drunk by men. This female brew does not entail many taboos at all, be it *mpedli* or *tè*. Though women do try to avoid sexual intercourse during the night of preparation – after all they are up the whole night in the brewery – it is not a matter of ritual interest. Women do make money out of beer and especially for young women this is an interesting option. Usually their husband starts them out in the business with the first millet or sorghum, and then they are on their own, financing the grains with their own revenues. As usual in Kapsiki society, the male and female budgets are firmly separated within the household itself. A man does not occupy himself with his wife's means to

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ravages of alcoholism, often in urban settings (Obayemi 1976, Karp 1980, Douglas 1987, Jolly 1995, Heap 1998, Bryceson 2002). The role of the colonial and neo-colonial governments, with their specific and contradictory interests in raising taxes and protecting public health, ties in with this discourse (Fischler 1990, Bryceson 2002, Gewald 2002). At the informants' side, similar debates rage, as the choice of not-drinking versus drinking is a powerful means to redefine one's identity, often along religious lines (van Dijk 2002, Luning 2002).

<sup>13</sup> Of course, this is not exceptional. This function of beer is quite comparable with the symbolic position of beer among the Haya, Tanzania (Carlson 1990).



■ Picture 5  
Zra Demu preparing to spray beer  
over the entrance of his house.

make a buck, and neither helps her nor take from her earnings. Though a woman should give her husband a small pot of beer after brewing, to drink with his friends, the majority of his beverage he has to buy himself at the market. In fact, it is not unusual to see a man buying beer from another brewer, even if his wife is standing with her pots at the same market.

The red kind, as said, has become increasingly popular, more work, but also more gain and definitely more customers. When money is made, taboos flounder, and seemingly the neat former division between ritual red and secular white beer is eroding. However, the main issue is that difference between kinds of beer no longer is expressed in colour. The significance of the ritual beer is too large to be infiltrated by women making money (in a way the man do appreciate !). It is not the way of brewing, not the recipe for sprouting that makes red beer the ritual variety; the difference is in the gender of the brewer, in the occasion for which beer is used and in the rhythmic count of the days needed for the brew. It is not beer that adduces meaning to ritual, but the ritual imbues beer with its symbolic content and the vehicle for the symbolism is the gender of the brewer. So the fact that women have taken up the brewing of *té*, might seemingly have changed the neat dichotomy present in *té* versus *mpeldi*, but in reality has had little effect : the basic distinction between male and female beer remains unhampered.

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