

META POLITICAL SYSTEM

by Paul NCHOJI NKWI

My paper is an analysis of the Meta Political and Judicial organisation, more especially, their method of conflict resolution. Before I present this subject, I will like to make a few comments on this quest for a typology. Sometimes one gets the feeling while reading through most monographs that there is an imposition of terms in Africa. This is the point Mr. Owono was trying to raise. I think his position is valid and pertinent. Today the emic and etic approaches to the study of cultures is very much encouraged. We should desist from using pre-conceived concepts and categories in the descriptions of the institutions we study. We should rather try to understand the way people perceive; how they relate; and how they classify their own experiences. This new approach which has been adopted by many scholars, should, according to me, be adequate for the establishment of any reasonable typology.

My subject is based entirely on the studies made by Chilver (1965) and Dillon (1976, 1977). Meta chiefdoms or villages are found to the southeastern part of the North-West Province of Cameroon. They constitute a greater part of the present Momo division. According to their oral traditions they reached their present site on the plateau from Widekum to the south, probably in the early part of the last century. They migrated in groups of families or clans searching for land. Although the different clans make a geneological claim of close connection, yet there is no evidence to show a close ethnic link. It is evident from a study of their social institutions that inter-village alliances were formed by the different clans just after reaching their present site. These alliances were established for several reasons. Firstly, alliances expressed their political sentiment; secondly, they also expressed their reaction to the contemporary political situation. Their symbiotic existence alongside more centralised or well-organised chiefdoms was bound to create a new feeling of oneness and to pro-

mote social solidarity. And consequently, they must have modified or agreed to modify their older structures.

The Meta geneological lists are very short in comparison with other Grassfield tribes. The longest list usually has four to five generations. These geneologies which constitute a network give accent to inter-clan corporation and help to consolidate tribal unity. The names of clan or village heads or leaders are invoked and this innovation had the same functional dimension as the geneologies.

It is speculated, and rightly, so, that the Meta chiefdoms modified their socio-political structures after coming into contact with some Grassfield chiefdoms. Territorially, the Meta country is broken up into valleys in which sixteen villages are found. Each village is further divided into small units or quarters. Each village has its own chief. The homestead is comparatively small, the largest being those of village chiefs having a structure of three to four houses. The compound of the village chief is usually the centre of village activities. Within the village there are a number of patrilineal descent groups or clans. Usually it is a residential unit comprising ten to thirty households.

How was the Meta country functioning politically? What is their Political system? According to Chilver and Dillon the Meta have a segmentary political structure. Segmentation is a pertinent concept in the description of Meta clan organisation. Etymologically the word Meta comes from another word ta which means 'to catter or disperse'. In fact the Meta are broken up into clans. Meta political structure permits the easy creation of other units. A number of factors promote this process of segmentation. The gradual transfer of certain privileges from bigger to small units or lineages promotes independence and clan segmentation. The extended families constitute potential independent segments.

The more the head of the senior clan treats the smaller units as separate entities, the more they become independent and autonomous, and likely to break off. What are the privileges that promote independence and segmentation? Each head of the extended household must give his sons the possibilities to acquire land and build. By establishing a household a son enters a stage during which he controls a certain number of persons - wives and children. Secondly, those heads of families or lineages who have acquired a sacrificial hut or shrine, or a libation hole, can and do acquire a position of a religious leader. As a religious leader acting more independently, he can lead those who believe in his religious authority out of the original clan.

Thirdly, sometimes the creation of a new lineage or the sanctioning of a new segment can be effected through or by making a blood or a goat sacrifice. It is the head of the senior lineage who presides over the official segmentation process. But when this does happen, the two lineages concerned would establish an alliance, usually a marriage alliance, that is the exchange of women. This process of segmentation by which a blood sacrifice is performed, takes place in the fourth or the fifth generation. Clans continue to segment as conditions permit, and they remain united through alliances.

How does the village government function? Each village with its multiplicity of lineages or clans has a council of senior elders. The most senior of these councillors is usually the head of the village. In some of the sixteen villages, there are two sets of councillors: the palace councillors and the village servants. The palace councillors are title owners. The first of these is a market announcer; the second is the organiser of the annual hunt. Some of the councillors are the guidance of war medicine. In pre-colonial times they used to administer to fighters the war medicine as a means of protection against both physical and spiritual injuries. One Councillor was the "spokesman". He

went between the chief and the people. He was the sanctuary of the chief's anger. He was a close relative of the chief. If an individual annoyed the chief, the chief could not deal directly with him. He had to go through the spokesman who acted as the intermediary. He was sacrosanct when he was acting as such. There were also liaison officers who acted as intermediaries between the palace councillors and the servants of the village. The servants of the village were the heads of the different junior lineages.

It does appear that some titles have been diffused or borrowed from the more centralised chiefdoms. For example, ^{the}market announcer and the organiser of the annual hunt are common titles in most centralised Grassfield chiefdoms. Another institution which seems also to have been diffused into the area is kwefor. It is a regulatory society which the Meta did not possess when they reached the plateau. As a cohesive institution, it is said that it was repudiated when it was first introduced. Today in Meta country, people say public morality has fallen because of the introduction and utilisation of this cohesive institution. The Meta political and ideological framework rules out physical force in the regulation of conflict. Physical cohesion plays little or no role in their judicial process. Grievances are ventilated through descent groups and covenants and not through the use of cohesive institutions, such as kwefor. The Meta are said to have accepted the introduction of kwefor, not for the regulation of conflicts but for the performances of certain specific duties such as the control of markets and the establishment and control of village boundaries. Kwefor, also had the duty of preserving the oral testament of chiefs. Before a chief died, he told kwefor who his successor would be. It was kwefor that instructed the new chief in his ritual and political functions. Kwefor also ensured that the new chief went through all the different ritual processes that made him a full and powerful chief. In short, kwefor played little or no role in the judicial process.

In the original Meta judicial process little reference is made to mediate or physical force. It is the moral or supernatural forces that are believed to act decisively in any judicial matters. Within the descent group, no direct physical pressure is brought to bear on the individual, if he has violated the social norms. The supernatural forces - Gods, spirits and ancestors are believed to punish those who have violated the social norms. Outside the descent group other forms of conflict resolutions exist. Conflicts over persons of property; conflicts over livestock. People fight over raffia palms; people neglect to pay bridewealth. If a man refused to refund bridewealth after a woman remarries, it is believed misfortune can befall the person and this will require a ritual process to settle. In all these forms of conflicts, no direct mediate force is used. There is no instituted cohesive machinery to resolve these conflicts.

The concept of ndon in Meta expresses the idea that the guilty person in a conflict can be and usually is punished supernaturally. A person who steals a goat will expect that misfortune will befall him if he does not resort to so ritual process. This misfortune can be inflicted if the party wronged utters a word. In Meta cosmology the "word" is so powerful that it can call on the supernatural powers to inflict punishment on the guilty. Illness, poverty, barrenness, accidental deaths are all manifestations of the supernatural punishments for known or unknown crimes. If a person falls ill, he must re-examine his conscience to see if there is debt unpaid; or if he did not pay fully the bridewealth of his wife; or if a person was killed by his lineage man and no settlement was ritually reached at.

Amon the Meta two types of supernatural dangers (ndon) exist: the first type deals with the violation of moral rules and the second concerns ritual pollution. According to Meta cosmological beliefs supernatural dangers hang over every person in the society. If an individual does not conform to specific moral

norms, he will be punished supernaturally. If a person beats his father or mother, or his senior brother, or if he commits adultery or refused to refund the bridewealth of a daughter who divorced and remarried; it was believed the gods would punish the guilty party if the offended party pronounced a word (curse). A word of discontent was believed to be so powerful as to provoke the anger of the gods and ancestors who could react by punishing him with any form of misfortune. The complaints of village leaders, clan heads and quarter heads were also likely to produce this supernatural misfortune - ndon.

The other type of Ndon is one of ritual pollution. The clan, lineage or village can be ritually polluted by crimes considered as unnatural. These include death by lightning, death in pregnancy, and other symbolic acts of aggression. Symbolic acts of aggression are believed to bring supernatural misfortune. Some crimes or acts pollute the community, clan or lineage ritually and therefore require a long process of purification.

For example, if A owes B twenty thousand francs and does not want to pay his debt. If A throws a spear at B's roof, it is a symbolic act of aggression which indicates that A will not kill B but A hopes that B will be punished supernaturally. Another symbolic act of aggression is the destruction of an enemy's crops. These acts all fall under ritual pollution.

In the resolution of conflict there is the guilty and the offended parties. These two parties cannot fully resolve their conflict without the involvement of the third party, the masses. Let us take a concrete example of homicide. If two persons fought and one killed the other, the first thing the common people did, was to rush to the compound of the guilty party, destroyed everything and even burn down his house. This was a manifestation of discontent and disapproval of the act. The second thing that had

to take place was the disposal of the dead body by a specialist. No one was allowed to remove the body except a specialist whose fees included a goat, some wine and a fowl. If there were five compounds to pass by on the way to the burial place, the specialist and his assistance would be given a fowl by each head of those compound.

The relatives of the guilty party had to take precautions in order to forestall any supernatural misfortune that might be inflicted on them as a consequence. How did they avert this ndon? They had to approach the ritual chief of the entire Meta country. In earlier times the relatives brought to this ritual priest a goat, fowls and a slave. The person who actually committed the homicide accompanied his relatives to the chief's palace. Since it was difficult to obtain a slave, it took even months before the guilty person and his relatives were freed from this supernatural danger. When he and his relatives came to the chief with the gifts, he was taken into the inner courts where his head, unshaved for months, was ritually shaved and a libation was poured. He was led out and handed back to his people. He was now pure and freed of the crime, and the supernatural danger, ndon. The slave who had been brought as a replacement of the man who was killed, remained in the palace in the service of the chief.

There are some basic reasons for which the ritual process had to be fully carried out. Firstly, the individual guilty person had to play an active part in the ritual process because the supernatural danger, ndon, threatened his own life. He could die if he did not co-operate in the ritual process. Secondly there was a whole network of social pressures. The common people manifested their displeasure by the destroyal of property; his relatives wanted him to co-operate in the ritual resolution because the crimes could also affect them supernaturally; there was also the specialist who could not dispose of the body unless the fee was paid. In a sense, the crime had a vast social implication and therefore had to be ritually resolved to avert the supernatural danger, ndon.

Among the Meta, there are some conflicts which do not need ritual purifications. These include theft, habitual witchcraft, long standing debts within the lineage. Meta clans are localised descent groups within which non-ritual polluted crimes are resolved. If a lineage man steals a goat of his kinsman, the matter will be resolved within the descent group. It seems to come clear that kwefor was borrowed by the Meta people to deal with certain non-ritual polluted crimes, and has continued to function as such without necessarily interfering in the original judicial Meta process.

In conclusion, we can affirm that the Meta political system was original segmentary and still remains largely so, even though there has been a tendency to adopt institutions diffused from the more centralised chiefdoms of the Grassfields.

Reference

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D E B A T S à la suite de l'exposé de D. NKWI

Pius SOH BEJENG

"Well, I have one or two observations to make on the exposé of Dr. NKWI. I think the affirmation that the Metta came from the forest area should be received with a lot of reserve because, when Chilver Kaberry and Dillon were making the statement, I don't know whether they had linguistic/cultural evidence to affirm this. I am saying this because, presently I am studying the Ngemba group who claim to have come from Widekum or Ntadium, and it is the same claim that the Metta make that they too came from these two areas, Widekum or Ntedkum. My Ngemba informants agree that the Metta people were their neighbours. They were living almost side by side. A hypothesis which has been put forward, fairly recently maintains that the Ngemba from the linguistic point of view are closely related to the Bamileke, especially of the Mbouda area. They Ngembas are believed to have entered Widekum, through the Fontem area where you have the Bangwa group, now living. So they stayed in this area and the reason they advanced for leaving Widekum is that the area was overpopulated and so they decided to move a bit into the grassfield area. And now when one interviews informants from the Ngemba group, they say we came from Widekum and they start naming the chiefs that have reigned or the ancestors. They give you quite a list. Some of the lists are really long, others are relatively short. Now if there are no special indications that the Metta were a forest people, could we through this hypothesis not also presume that they too might have come from the western grassfield area, that is from the present Bamileke region, and moved into the Widekum area and not finding that the place was really convenient or the environment was good for the grassfield people, they decided to disperse towards the area where they are now. If there are no other indications can this hypothesis on the origin of the Metta not be accepted.

Now after the great dispersal from Widekum, there was a process of segmentation which Dr. Nkwi dwelled upon and I quite agree. If you take the Ngemba for example as a groupe, they have broken up since into fourteen chiefdoms. There was a struggle for succession between the princes and each one of them having a following moved, taking his followers and settled in another area, constitute themselves into a group, and the first thing they did was that the leader of course, became the chief, symbols of power are immediately fabricated and given to him, and so they settled. So that you have these groups both the Metta and the Ngemba, have had a lot of fragmentation since their departure from Widekum, broken down into linguistic units or into villages with political structures fairly identical so called big chiefdoms in the grass-field such as Mankon. Mankon is the point of discute.

They talk about the genealogy of the Metta being short. Well there is one thing. After a people have broken up from another group, there is always this tendency to want to hide the fact that they were once attached to this group of people. So you come to the situation where you have people with short genealogies: they cite six chiefs that they had before, and they say these chiefs came from Widekum which is a falsification of facts because, having broken away from a larger ensemble they want to justify their political existence. They hide the fact that, at a given time, they were once with this group of people. And this is seen even the phenomenon of the changing of the language. People break up and after a couple of years you find the group that moved away speaking a language that is almost entirely different. So these are some of the ideas I would want to add to his exposé.

Then there was a question he brought up prior to the borrowing of the institution called Kwifor. Was there any other institution existing and performing the rule which the Kwifor is presently performing ?

Well for the Ngemba area there are affirm very categorically that there was an institution called the takoeng, that played the same role as koi 'fo does these days. You know the roles may not be as complexe as the ones that the Kwifor is presently playing but there was an institutions, takoeng which was exercising some of the functions of the Kwifor at the moment. Among these functions one can quote for an example, "Capital punishment", putting somebody to death, for a serious offence like murder or committing adultery with the chief's wife, putting of injunction on disputed areas etc. So these are just a few ideas which I want to bringforth to his exposé".

M. NKWI Paul NCHOJI

"I want to make an observation as regard choice of leadership which it seems to have given one of the major criterias which is capacity to control and to provide leadership which is also determinant factor in some stateless societies.

But I don't think it is a unique criteria because you find that they are certain acephalous societies where leadership is also hereditary this determined on the bases of hereditary. The fact that even the leader of a village that the group chooses only his son either the first or the second son and when they choose, that is from among the sons, well that is the capacity to lead then plays also a centre role like among the Ibos I don't think it is the son. Any person who has shown the capacity to lead can be chosen. But blood relationship is not a determining factor there; but in some it is.

M. DELPECH

Je pense que pour le cas que j'évoquerais plus tard, il y a une certaine ambiguïté. Il y a bien choix d'un leader, il se fait souvent dans un lignage et parmi les anciens de ce lignage et peut ainsi devenir héréditaire, mais il y a tout de même choix.

Cosme DIKOUME

"Mon intervention soulève en fait un problème déjà évoqué ce matin par S. Ndoumbé-Manga: il faut de temps en temps dépasser les petits groupes que nous étudions pour regarder les autres groupes voisins. Nous en ressentons ici le besoin. S. Ndoumbé-Manga soulignait l'importance d'une coopération en matière de recherche scientifique, et on peut se demander s'il ne serait pas nécessaire d'organiser des rencontres systématiques pour tous les chercheurs s'intéressant à la même aire géographique".

Paul NKWI

I will like to make a few observations. Some scholars who have worked in the Grassfields are making an effort in the exchange of ideas and in the promotion of comparative studies. A colloquium is being organised on the Grassfield political institutions. This coincides with the theme of this day of our reflection with Prof. Jacques Lombard. The colloquium which is due to take place in France this year will examine the pre-colonial political systems of the Bamenda Grassfields and the Bamiléké region. Richard Dillon has prepared a communication for that colloquium from which I have drawn a lot of inspiration for my present paper. Those who have studied the so-called Widekum peoples (Meta, Ngemba) have not arrived at the same conclusions concerning their place of origin. The peoples asserted they came from the direction of Widekum. They maintain that Meta reached the plateau from Widekum or Ntarkun, as distinct clans, and that ever since then the process of segmentation has continued to produce more distinct descent groups. Dillon as well as Chilver have given a better analysis of this process in their works. They seem to agree that the so-called Widekum peoples are culturally and linguistically related".

Nchoji-Nkwi P. (1978)

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