

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF WATER IN THE KUPTO SOCIETY OF NORTHERN NIGERIA

Rudolf LEGER

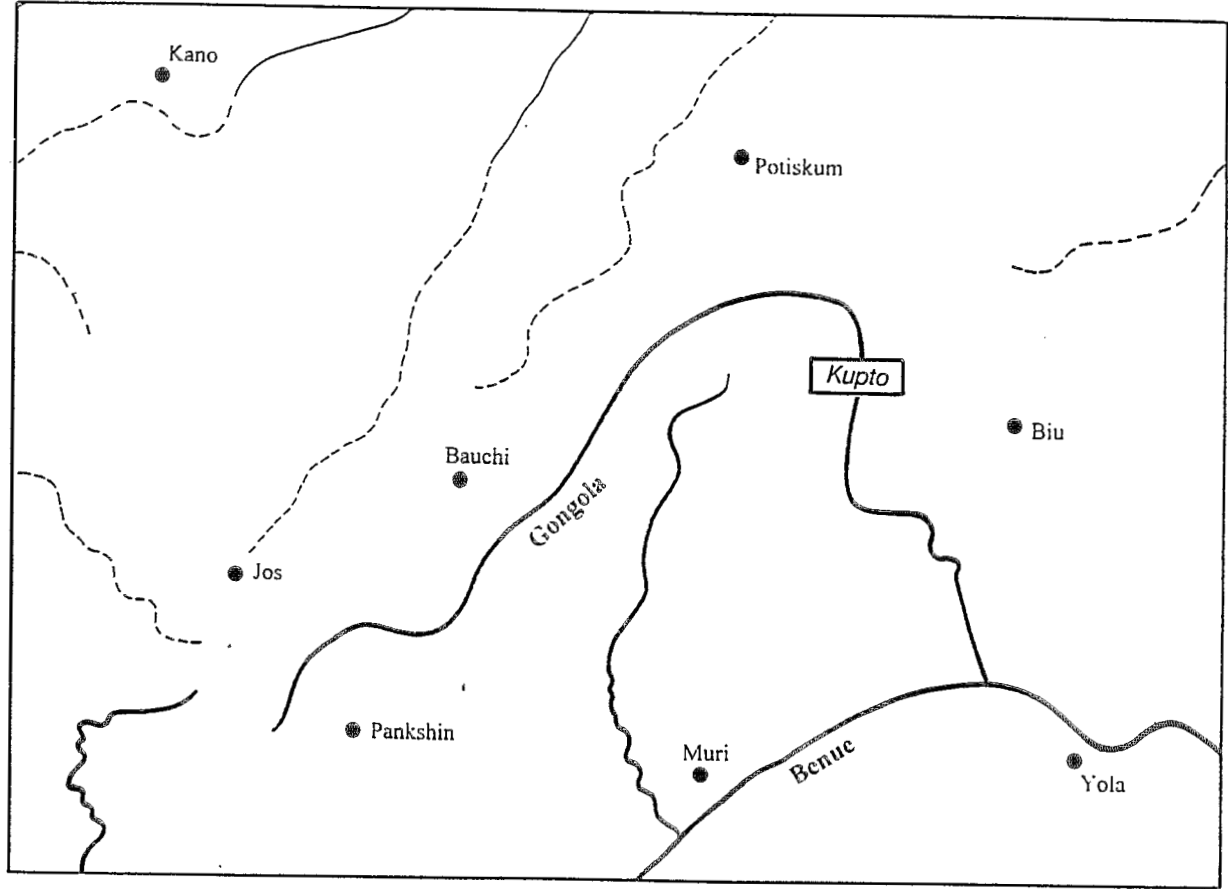
University of Frankfurt

### Abstract

Water as full of blessings as it is for the Kupto, a small Chadic speaking group in Northeastern Nigeria, is at the same time a very dangerous element in their imaginative world. It is the kingdom of *nùddù ʔàm* "the mother of water". She is a fabulous and dangerous creature, who rules over her realm with the help of her servants *kódóm* and *néké*, i.e. "crocodile" and "hippopotamus". Her magic power can only be banned by a certain formula or to satisfy her a black he-goat must be slaughtered. But water has also the power of healing and it is used when hunting animals or courting ladies. It seems that in Kupto philosophy there is a dichotomy between terrestrial and celestial water. Terrestrial water belongs to the sphere of God, celestial water to the sphere of the ancestors. If there is no rainfall then the *jókó-jókó* ceremony takes place, in which old women sing a special song on the graveyard of the dead chiefs to get rain.

**Keywords:** water, rain song, Kupto, Northeastern Nigeria.

NORTHEASTERN NIGERIA



*Ẹ̀m fóniyè màglà*<sup>1</sup> "Water is a gift of God". This proverb of the Kupto, a small Chadic-speaking group<sup>2</sup>, who lives on both sides of the Gongola river in Bauchi and Yobe State in Northeastern Nigeria, expresses not merely the highly esteemed value of this element, but rather the disposition over it by a divine power. Indeed, according to the oral tradition of the Kupto, "water" was given to men by God. The Kupto myth explaining how water was created, runs as follows:

A small boy was abandoned in the deep forest by his step-mother. He was left alone and he cried. Suddenly he heard the voice of a spirit out of a tree saying: "Take a stick and hit the tree in front of you". But the boy did not obey and instead of hitting the tree he threw the stick up into the branches to get some fruits to eat. Yet the stick did not come back, nor did the fruits fall down. And after some days, the voice was heard again, which said: "You have now suffered enough and I give you back the stick. Hit this tree again and leave the place; but do not turn back your head". The boy did first as he was told; but soon he became too curious to see what was coming after him and he forgot the command. As soon as he turned his head, the cows, which were appearing out of the tree and were following him, stopped coming any further. So, he had to follow this remaining herd for years. And the voice spoke to him again: You have eaten the dust of your herd and your mouth is now full of sand. I will give you this very thing, which you do not know, but which is the most important one in life for you and for your animals. And this is my advice and wish: Take the stick and hit the cow in front of you. He did so and the cow started to urinate first and then disappear; and the urine was transformed into water. Thus, since that time, water is on earth, which men, animals and plants can enjoy".<sup>3</sup>

But water, as full of blessings as it may be for all creatures in this Savannah zone, is also a very dangerous element in the imaginative world of the Kupto. It is the kingdom of *nùddù Ẹ̀m*, the water-spirit, literally translated as "mother of water". In many Kupto stories, *nùddù Ẹ̀m* appears and she never shows any mercy nor compassion with her victims, irrespective of whether a man is guilty and must be punished therefore, or not. She is considered to be a little unmarried old woman, although she has female children, and drinks the blood of human beings. She preferably kills strangers and young ladies, who are very proud of

<sup>1</sup> Literally translated: "water is a seed of God".

<sup>2</sup> HOFFMANN 1971, p. 3; NEWMAN 1977, p. 4 + 37; LEGER 1991, p. 80; LEGER 1994, p. 8; HANSFORD et al. 1976, p. 114 + 186.

<sup>3</sup> The story was related to me by Malam Rimi Kupto in February 1993.

their beauty, by pulling them under water. The dead bodies she usually releases after seven days without any damage. In the early afternoon she sometimes comes to the riverside with her daughters to take a rest or to wash her clothes, which are considered to be multicoloured. She makes use of two animals as her servants namely *kòdòm*, i.e. "crocodile" and *néké*, "hippopotamus", to rule over her realm. And whenever in a story one of these animals appears - they never appear together -, it is always by order of "mother water". Therefore a spell against these two animals is also directed against *nùddù Ìàm*, presumably because her name is not permitted to be spoken openly. Her magic power can only be banned by the following formula<sup>4</sup>:

<i>kòdòm kòdòm nè kán bóróm máarim</i>	Crocodile, crocodile, I have a bundle of <i>máarim</i> - grass
<i>kòdòm kòdòm nè kán bóróm bùlàngà</i>	Crocodile, crocodile, I have a bundle of <i>bùlàngà</i> -lilies
<i>nèkè nèkè nè kán bóróm tábá</i>	Hippopotamus, hippopotamus, I have a bundle of <i>tábá</i> -grass
<i>nèkè nèkè nè kán bóróm tíítí</i>	Hippopotamus, hippopotamus, I have a bundle of <i>tíítí</i> -branches
<i>máy ?àm lúmú lúmú</i>	King of water, dive, dive!
<i>máy ?àm ?ábbú kwàalf</i>	King of water, climb a calabash!
<i>máy ?àm búulú fúhá ?ar shíínà</i>	King of water, throw sand with your right hand!
<i>búulú fúhá tòŋ</i>	Throw the sand (first) northwards!
<i>búulú fúhá yèléeli</i>	Throw the sand (then) southwards!
<i>búulú fúhá wúní</i>	Throw the sand (then) westwards!
<i>búulú fúhá d'ár</i>	Throw the sand (then) eastwards!

<sup>4</sup> An interesting feature is that in the formula the high tone pattern of *kòdòm* and *néké* has to be changed into a low tone pattern.

*kòdòm kòdòm nè kán bóróm  
máarim*

Crocodile, crocodile, I have a  
bundle of *máarim*-grass

*kòdòm kòdòm nè kán bóróm  
bùlàngà*

Crocodile, crocodile, I have a  
bundle of *bùlàngà*-lilies

*nèkè nèkè nè kán bóróm tábá*

Hippopotamus, hippopotamus, I  
have a bundle of *tábá*-grass

*nèkè nèkè nè kán bóróm tíít*

Hippopotamus, hippopotamus, I  
have a bundle of *tíít*-branches

Though *nùddù ?àm* is considered a fabulous creature in the stories, she is nevertheless a reality in the social life of the Kupto. The only one, who is allowed to speak to *nùddù ?àm* personally is the *máy ?àm*, i.e. "the king of water", who is also the chief of the fishermen. But he may not talk to her in public. Therefore, he has to approach her under water, to beg her for permission for himself and his people to catch fish. If she denies his request, fishing is over for that day. The reality of her presence becomes also apparent when a well dries up. The Kupto believe that *nùddù ?àm* has been offended and that she therefore drank the water, to cool her anger. To satisfy her, a black he-goat must be slaughtered on the brim of the well, whose meat is then eaten by little children. If the water does not come back, the procedure has to be repeated before a new well can be dug. Furthermore, up to now, the most beautiful girl of the Kupto - which means the one, who has the most suitors - is not allowed to go and fetch water from the Gongola river, because she is in danger of being drowned by *nùddù ?àm*. Furthermore, young children are warned, or even prevented, from going in the early afternoon to the riverbank to play, because *nùddù ?àm* should not be disturbed while taking a rest, together with her daughters. This would also be the reason why the boys, after their circumcision, go to the *wàr-wár* ceremony in the early morning, after which they sit in the river against the current, to cool and heal their fresh wounds.

And indeed, water has the power of healing and - to a certain extent - a power of magic in several Kupto stories. Especially the *kòrkù fòk tòmìn* meaning "rain mouth in front", literally "the first rain" is a medicine, which miraculously and rapidly heals wounds, mainly caused by harvesting implements. Mixed together with pounded leaves of the *bùumò*, which is the "sheebutter tree", and applied to the body, it protects farmers from sun-burn, as well as from tiredness when working in the fields. And hunters use it also. They smear it on the soles of their feet, believing, that they are not scented when stalking game. It is reported from *Lá-bàrá*, a famous mythological hunter of the Kupto, that he dipped his arrow-

heads in that liquid and this is why no arrow ever missed its target. But also clever ladies' men make use of *kòrkù fòk tòmìn*. Many stories deal with the adroitness with which the suitor applies a little of this water to the back of his adored or how he makes her to drink a drop of it. Once she has drunk it, she falls hopelessly in love. In stories, this condition is described as *kwáttúnú mèccè tà mappà*, meaning "prevented from going to a stranger". The condition of *kwáttúnú mèccè tà mappà*, comes into effect also, when a woman eats of a certain fish, which is called *tándú*. It is a small, yellowish fish, whose meat is very tasty. Eaten by a stranger, it makes him to forget to go back home, until the magical power subsides.

Whereas the Kupto distinguish more than 20 fish by name, only two of these (more) - namely *zòlók* the "mud-fish" (*Parachanna obscura*) and *mídé-mídé* "*Heterotis niloticus*" have a special significance in their culture. The former is considered to be very stupid, because it eats its tail when there is no food in the dry season and it can be caught very easily<sup>5</sup>. Every year, there is only one day, when *zòlók* is hunted by the whole community. This fishing festival is called *fàrtè Shòokà* "fishing in Shooka". *Shòokà* here denotes a certain place, but also stands for a river, which has no drainage. The latter fish *mídé-mídé* is used by wrestlers, who secretly tie its skin around the arm or leg, believing it makes the opponent weak, when touching their body. With its fat the diseases *tìmbídìm* or *ʔádúk* "elephantiasis" (meaning euphemistically "load") and *ʔáaná* "guinea-worm" can be treated, both of which are believed to be caused by water: *ʔádúk* by wading in the water and *ʔáaná* by drinking putrid or dirty water, which is called *ʔàm ñ ʔyò yógné* "water of an elephant-footprint". Some more of these allegoric expressions in the language, composed with "water" are: *ʔàm mùdì* "water of pupil", i.e. "tears"; *ʔàm yàgnì* "water of bee", i.e. "honey"; *ʔàm ʔàhò* "water of stomach", i.e. "belly"; *ʔàm wí* "water of fire", i.e. "flame" and *ʔàm kúy* "water of head", meaning "sperm". Furthermore, various colour-terms are rendered in combination with the word water; for example: *ʔàm tòm* "water blood", i.e. "dark red"; *ʔàm táy* "water red", i.e. "pink"; *ʔàm bòkkó* "water (of) leaves", i.e. "green"; *ʔàm lákàdó* "water (of) locust bean tree", i.e. "yellow"; *ʔàm múzù* "water (of) cornbin-roof", i.e. "brown" and *ʔàm Dòomà* "water (of) Gombe-town", which means "blue".

Less expressions can be found, composed with the word *kòrkù*, meaning "rain". Apart from the above mentioned example *kòrkù fòk tòmìn* "first rain", there is also *kòrkù bì ròsò* "rain behind neck", literally "the last rain".

<sup>5</sup> Cf. TOURNEUX 1988, p. 127f.

The concept of rain, in opposition to water, is - apparently - not so much connected with (any spirit or) God, but rather with the Ancestors. It could be argued, therefore, that a dichotomy exists in the cultural perception of water within Kupto philosophy: terrestrial water belongs to the sphere of God; celestial water to the sphere of the Ancestors.

This is apparent, when there is no rainfall. Then the Ancestors are beseeched to send rain, as they are the guarantors for a fruitful coexistence between man and nature. Indeed, in the oral tradition of the Kupto, the Ancestors possess the role of preservers of the social order (of its natural continuity). Contrary to the divine powers, which are the creators of elements, the Ancestors are first and foremost responsible that these elements function for the welfare of the society. Therefore it can be assumed that rain is theirs to command.

This becomes apparent, when rain fails to come even at a very late time in the rainy season. Then as the last resort, a ceremony takes place in the late afternoon, which is called *jókó-jókó*. The elder women of the village put on old men's dress, each one holding a stick in the hand and following two drums, which lead them to the graveyard of the dead chiefs. There, they make a circle around the grave of the king, who died last; then to the one who died before him and so on; and start dancing around the grave, singing a special song. This song is called *kùshì kòrkù* "cry(ing) for rain". One old woman starts singing, the rest singing the refrain, as the chorus.

Singer	Chorus	Translation
<i>kùshì kòrkù yè</i>	<i>yèe-yèe</i>	Crying for rain, yè
<i>Máy Jibir yè</i>	<i>yèe-yèe</i>	King Jibir, yè
<i>?àttò kòrkù bà</i>	<i>yèe-yèe</i>	Bring rain please:
<i>shàwmù ?à yòkrò</i>	<i>yèe-yèe</i>	Our corn is drying,
<i>kòrkù kiddà</i>	<i>yèe-yèe</i>	Rain has failed.
<i>nà kòrkù tìnábbà</i>	<i>yèe-yèe</i>	If rain does not come
<i>mìn kù dàykò</i>	<i>yèe-yèe</i>	We will perish.
<i>shàwmù ?à yòkrò</i>	<i>yèe-yèe</i>	Our corn is drying,
<i>kòrkù kiddà</i>	<i>yèe-yèe</i>	Rain has failed.
<i>nà kòrkù tìnábbà</i>	<i>yèe-yèe</i>	If rain does not come
<i>mìn kù dàykò</i>	<i>yèe-yèe</i>	We will perish.
<i>mìn kù dàykò</i>	<i>yèe-yèe</i>	We will perish.

And according to my main collaborator for over ten years - Malam Buba Liman Kupto, to whom I am indebted for nearly all the above information - *rain definitively will fall*.

**Bibliography**

- HANSFORD K. J. Bendor-Samuel and R. Stanford, 1976, *An Index of Nigerian Languages*, Studies in Nigerian Languages No 5, Accra.
- HOFFMANN C., 1971, "Provisional Check List of Chadic Languages". *Chadic Newsletter, Special Issue*, January 1971.
- LEGER R., 1991, "Grammatische Analyse einer Herkunftserzählung der Kupto". *Frankfurter Afrikanistische Blätter* 3, pp. 78-93.
- , 1994, *Eine Grammatik der Kwami-Sprache (Nordostnigeria)*, Köln.
- NEWMAN P., 1977, "Chadic Classification and Reconstructions". *Afroasiatic Linguistics* 5/1, p. 1-42.
- TOURNEUX H., 1988, "Le protoptère et le déluge, *Le milieu et les hommes. Recherches comparatives et historiques dans le bassin du Lac Tchad. Actes du 2ème colloque Méga-Chad*, Paris: Orstom.