

## NGAMDO: A COMMUNITY'S THIRST FOR WATER

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### Abstract

The paper highlights a ritual among the Kwami community in the North Eastern part of Nigeria. The discussion links the importance of water to the people's concern for a cultural identity. Along the line, *Ngamdo*, the Kwami community's rain-making ritual, is seen to assume a significance that is at once realistic and symbolic.

In performance, *Ngamdo* involves people from all aspects and sectors of Kwami from the elders to children, and female to the male. When it is on, *Ngamdo* singing and dances affect all residents of Kwami, thus the ritual cannot be understood outside the essence of the people and the town.

Simultaneous with highlighting its importance, the paper also acknowledges the gradual attenuation of *Ngamdo* in Kwami. But because culture and cultural practises are inevitable in communities, the paper concludes that *Ngamdo* cannot really die out despite the immanent threat posed by Islam and the forces of westernisation.

**Keywords:** rain-making ritual, Kwami, Bauchi State, Nigeria.

### Résumé

Nous nous proposons dans cette communication d'évoquer une pratique rituelle chez le groupe kwami au nord du Nigéria. Il s'agit de la cérémonie de *ngamdo*, à laquelle la communauté fait appel pour pallier le manque de pluie, vu que l'agriculture y constitue l'activité économique la plus importante.

Dans la première partie, nous révélons les personnages-clés, aussi bien que les gestes et les actes qui constituent le *ngamdo*, tout en mettant en valeur son aspect spirituel. Nous évoquons par la suite les menaces présentes, notamment l'influence islamique et la modernisation, qui pèsent sur ce rite. Cependant, nous avons l'intention de soulever, dans la conclusion, comment l'impact d'un renouveau culturel chez les Kwami se transforme en un défi devant ces mêmes menaces. Autrement dit, nous chercherons d'établir un lien entre la quête d'eau pour des besoins économiques et la quête d'une nouvelle identité authentique chez les Kwami.

**Mots-clés :** rite de pluie, kwami, Bauchi, Nigéria.

A small group of women was seen at about 6.00 p.m. in the month of May, 1990, at the door of *auni Kwami's* residence. The women were Daro Deja, Da Fatu, Da Fatu and Adda Yayi, four of the few oldest surviving women indigenes of Kwami. Old age and traditional expectation of them as elders accounted for these women's rare public appearance. The *auni* - the Kwami community leader - had often called for them when the community was faced with crisis.

"At first I said I would not come when the *auni's* messenger delivered his master's message" said Adda Yayi, one of my informers on this paper. The piercing agonising shrill voice, typical of possessed women, which rented the quiet evening air minutes after the four women were ushered before the *auni* was also hers. As I talked to her months after that incident and miles away from Kwami<sup>1</sup> the nostalgia that translated so easily into anger and a cry of anguish about neglected traditions in Kwami, could be seen repressed in her face. Adda Yayi and the other women were called by the *auni* because he was forced by pressing political issues to revive the custom of *gajere*<sup>2</sup>. Another traditional custom in Kwami suffering from a similar neglect is *ngamdo*, and Adda Yayi was equally enthusiastic to talk about it to me.

### What is *ngamdo*?

*Ngamdo* can be defined simply as the Kwami community's act of wishing for rain. However, because in practice *ngamdo* evidences the community's continued belief in the efficacy of super natural powers, *ngamdo* is at once water-witching and rain-making as found among some American and African communities. The usual time of *ngamdo* performance is in the rainy season, beginning in the months of March or April. When a long break in the frequency of rain which threatens the survival of plants and crops is experienced, a *ngamdo* performance is organized by the community. An agrarian community like Kwami treats all threats to a good harvest seriously. *Ngamdo* performance is a product of the community's wit, an aspect of its folklore, intended to offer a solution to one of its problems.

Without any exception, traditional and pre-literate societies depend on their folk culture in their efforts at combating both natural and human problems. Thus the *ngamdo* phenomenon is found in neighbouring communities to the Kwami, such as the Bolewa, Tera, Hausa and Fulani. These ethnic groups share with the

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<sup>1</sup> Adda Yayi was in Kano for the greater part of January-March 1993 on a visit to her son, serving with the Nigerian Police, Kano.

<sup>2</sup> *Gajere* is the Kwami Community's guardian spirit with its shrine in the *auni's* house.

Kwami the experience of a sub-Saharan climate and most of them have a historical link with the Lake Chad. Also, despite years of these communities' advocacy of Islam and experience of westernisation, elements of animism and superstition persist in aspects of their cultures.

Speculations on the origin of *ngamdo* in Kwami trace it to the reign of Auni Moi Gedo Bashoshe who is also credited with the introduction of *gajere* and its rituals. In origin both *ngamdo* and *gajere* are animist practices that pre-date Islam in Kwami community. Following the Islamic revivalism in West Africa, these rituals underwent a process of modification which brought to an end some aspects of their practices. The resultant change in practice and people's attitude to these rituals among the Kwami community as well as its neighbours is measured by the degree to which each imbibed the Islamic religion. Among the Hausas for example, *rokon ruwa*, the Hausa equivalent of *ngamdo*, has been integrated into Islam to which the whole community subscribed. Today, *rokon ruwa* is practised as prayer for rain addressed to Halliru or 'Yayan Halliru, the legendary saint in Islam believed to be residing in the Great Waters with his progeny since the time of Prophet Moses. However, *rokon ruwa* still retains tell-tale signs of its pre-Islamic origin among the Hausas, most especially in the practitioner's costume of rags, the accompanying music and songs, visits to revered objects or personalities. Yet *rokon ruwa* is believed to be wholly an Islamic practice by the average Hausa man.

### Ngamdo procedure

Two consecutive months of rainfall that normally start in March or April are enough to bring smiles on the face of farmers with the promise of good harvest in Kwami. Conversely, a break of a minimum of two weeks in the frequency of the rains could reverse the smiles to frowns of worry and even fear. From time immemorial, among the people in Kwami such worries about inadequate rainfall triggered traditional communal instincts that often culminated into *ngamdo*.

The *anin kwada* (title holders) notably the *kedila*, *furkuma*, *birin gina* and *shamaki* would, in moments of communal worry, express the people's anxiety to the *auni* who would proceed to make formal confirmation of the situation. Following the traditional channels of consultation, the *auni* would then call for the *kondo*, the town crier, and instruct him to call for *ngamdo* performance the following morning. On the same night the town crier executes his role the principal actors in *ngamdo* will go into action. A nocturnal meeting of the elderly participants at which the following day's itinerary will be mapped out takes place in the *auni*'s house. Decision about other things, such as the rate of individual contribution and donation, will be made that night. Sometimes the leader of the

performers will be agreed upon at the meeting. However, often such elder-leaders were known for almost all *ngamdo* occasions. Normally, the *ainin kolle*, the community chief drummer, is also contacted and informed about the occasion.

*Ngamdo* commences the following morning at dawn with the beating of its peculiar tune familiar to all sons and daughters of Kwami. From the moment the tune is sounded at the *ainin kolle's* house, the whole town vibrates with the rhythm of chanting voices. The excitement generated, though subdued, is soon caught by everyone in the town, including non-indigenes and uninformed visitors. As the drummer makes his way to the *aini's* house, the stream of half-sleeping children following him with *ngamdo* chants grows in size. The chant and its staccato rhythm gradually engulfs the town:

*Ai ni wolikkino*  
*Ni wolugo*  
*Tagija arikkido*  
*Ni wolugo*  
*Moddo arikkido*  
*Ni wolugo.*

The drumming and chanting reach a peak at the *aini's* house where the procession stops to receive further directives. The leader for the day's performance will subsequently emerge and together with other elder participants he will lead the procession on the itinerary mapped out the previous night. The *ngamdo* chant will then be shouted out by the leader, while the other elders and the children will answer as a chorus. Life's travails and vicissitudes, especially the havoc posed by the wilting and drying food crops, will form the grand theme of the chants. Man is painted as a most unfortunate creature, self-reproachful and pitiable in the chants.

#### Terminals (*ngamdo* target locations)

Four terminals - target locations - have come to be associated with *ngamdo* performance over the years. These are Gwani Konong, grave sites of influential Kwami men, houses of living personalities endowed with supernatural or spiritual powers and the Fogi Falta or precincts of the *aini's* house. These locations have undergone some modifications over time with the result that some, like the Gwani Konong, were replaced by others only to come to be totally abandoned. Only one of these terminals may serve for a *ngamdo* occasion. However, it is not unusual for the procession to visit and perform at two or more locations in the course of the day.

Over the years and following "foreign" influences on Kwami, *ngamdo* has

undergone changes in all its aspects. Such a change is evident in the different target locations of the performances as mentioned. In the beginning, when *ngamdo* performance was ritualistic and only initiates into the cult were allowed to participate, the procession was led out of town to the Gwani Konong or later Dem Bori. These were spiritual groves housing the community's spirits located in the outskirts of the town. Adda Yayi, my 75-year old informer recalls the awe with which the Gwani Konong was regarded in her youth. This is still evident in *Konong Kaje tino* ("May Konong slit my neck") a Kwami oath-taking expression. Together, I and Adda Yayi also recounted the fear and awe around the Dem Bori, not quite a decade ago. Dem Bori is still a semi-sacred place dreaded by the youth in Kwami.

In those years it was to either of the two locations that the penitent Kwami community went with its sacrificial items, tokens of its self-reproach, to placate and appease the spirits whose displeasure with the people was assumed to cause the impending disaster. Often such sacrifices included fried nuts and grain-powder, goats to be killed and roasted, wine of local brew (the *burkutu*) all of which would be consumed and distributed at the occasion.

The increasing influence of Islam on the Kwami people must have eroded their belief in the spirits. Consequently, the target locations of *ngamdo* was modified. Adda Yayi could vividly recall the making of individual female personalities to serve as spiritual figures with powers to intercede between the community and supernatural forces that sustain human life. My informer remembers the case of Da Shendu Gu, a mysterious woman of Bannin Pawo endowed with rain-making power in Kwami. Thus, the powers hitherto reposed in the spirits independent of man came to be recognised in some individuals in the community. Da Sheindu Gu lived in a decrepit and desolate hut situated at the extreme end of Banning Pawo, Kwami town's Western Ward. The hut was Madame Gu's home, her world, indeed her entire universe as she was not known to venture out of it without a very strong reason. The mystery around her personality was increased by her rare public appearance, her desolate abode and eccentric behaviour whenever she was seen outside. Her speech, whenever she made one, was hardly audible and often her cryptic language would have to be decoded. Adda Yaya recounted how Madame Gu would have to roll up her abnormal eyelids before two yellow glowing eyes could set on her visitors. Sometimes she listened and responded to visitors with eyes shut. When she withdrew into her hut to perform rituals only known to her, after attending to *ngamdo* processions, the people never doubted her ability to make rain fall within hours of their visit.

Women like Da Shendu Gu were rare and their power was not often transferred to their kins. In addition, the ever-increasing influence of Islam and

westernisation constituted a powerful force that discouraged the making of human deities, which such *ngamdo* practice could easily result in. Thus, the death of Da Shendu Gu sometimes in 1930, brought to an end in Kwami of what may be called Kwami rain-makers. But threats to the community's well being in the form of long breaks in rain fall persist, so the cultural vacuum after the death of Madame Gu must be filled. It is true that Islam, a religion embraced by the Kwami community from time immemorial, provides avenues through which such cultural needs could be answered. However, despite the Kwami community's years of advocacy of Islam, there is not much to indicate the full blast of Islamisation in its culture.

In due course therefore, the community came up with a third way and target location for *ngamdo*. The performance assumed a more covert dramatic dimension with features of actors, personification and audience. After the usual nocturnal meeting and consultation, the whole community will meet early the following morning at the Fogi Falta, the wide community playground overlooking the *auni's* house. The principal actors in that morning's drama are members of the hierarchy of Kwami chiefs all of whom are men. All however will appear in womens' dress before the communal gathering. In an excited atmosphere of a symbolic change of roles, these male-turned-female leaders of Kwami will set to prepare a meal for the community.

The events of that day will be preceded by a donation, early that morning, from thrilled women, of domestic utensils such as the pestles, mortar, pots, tripods, spoons and plates. In addition also to their donation of the actors' costumes, the womenfolk will provide foodstuff like grains, tubers, spices and vegetables all of which will be made readily available by volunteering women whose eagerness and enthusiasm to donate verges upon a sudden desire to revenge years of male domination. When everything is set and all the actors come onto the stage, the sobriety of the atmospheres appears to be endangered by an underlying humour threatening to burst out into laughter as evident in the widespread smiles on faces in the "audience". Somehow however, sanity prevails and women settle to secretly enjoy the sight of their husbands in the "kitchen", children to marvel and be tickled, for the first time perhaps, at their fathers' clumsiness in doing things which even they could do better. The seriousness of the occasion is always preserved and protected from turning into a farce by the pressing reality that motivated it, and a taboo against laughter or similar expression of excitement.

The "actors" in that morning's performance who constitute the leadership of Kwami will engage in grinding, pounding, sifting, blending meal ingredients with a view to cook and serve the community with a meal. Often before the "cooks" and "stewards" complete their role and the "guests" go to the table, rain will fall and the crowd will be dispersed by pelting rain drops.

In recent times *ngamdo* processions are known to visit graves and grave sites of powerful and influential men of Kwami with a view of evoking the deceased's nobility and uncorrupted life. The perversive corruption in contemporary times is often blamed for natural and human catastrophes. Man's subsequent feeling of guilt translates into a recognition and reverence for a life of purity as lived by people of the past. Thus, corruption and man's guilt in it form the background to the Kwami community's grave-site visit in the course of *ngamdo*.

Another explanation for the grave-site visit in *ngamdo* performance can be found, once again, in the community's adopted religion, Islam, which sanctions visits to graves as an act of atonement for sins committed by man and prayers for the deceased's *baraka* (blessings) and his intercession to God on behalf of erring man. When the procession arrives a grave site, members set to mend holes in the grave and proceed to sweep and clean its surrounding. The drumming and chanting of "*Ai ni wolikkino*" will then be intensified and one or two female participants may fall to the ground in the paroxysm of grief-possession. Part of the motivating belief by the community, as it is the case in Islam, is that the impending catastrophe is the result of man's neglect of the ideals, as represented by the life lived by people of the past. The grave-site act is man's demonstration of his prodigality and repentance.

Salat-el-Istisqa'i, the islamic prayer for rain, is in essence like *ngamdo* in the Kwami community. The process of gradual modification and growing neglect of *ngamdo* has already been linked in this paper to the growing influence of Islamic religion in the Kwami community. As a result of the speed and strength of Islamisation, the average Kwami is today ignorant about *ngamdo* and similar other customs of his community.

When it is evident that the season's food crops and plants are wilting and drying off because of failure of the rains, the *auni* will call for the Imam and the *kondo*, and together, they will appoint a day to be announced by the latter on which people will come together for special prayers. When the day comes, without drums or songs, members of the community will come out dressed in rags and walk to the outskirts of Kwami to a cleared ground where they will be led in a short prayer by the Imam. Relevant verses of the Quran will be read by the Imam whose role, like that of his followers, has been pre-determined by a centuries old practice in Islam.

The sobriety of the occasion of Salat-el-Istisqa'i is never violated by new actions or uncontrolled excitement from the gathering. The gravity of the occasion is evident in the absolute silence maintained as much as in the participants' costume of rags, which also symbolise man's self-denial and penitent mood.

### Ngamdo renaissance?

In recent years an occasional wave of cultural revival has gripped Kwami community. Such a re-awakening in a community's historical origin that causes vibrations in aspects of culture is a global phenomenon of the 20th century. The Euro-American craze for roots following Alex Haley's book of that title, the Pan-African ideals that motivated nationalists in Africa and the negritude literary philosophy that came before it, appear to be a bandwagon effect of a global cultural re-awakening. Naturally, such a phenomenon will be reflected in smaller units of the global population. At first, it would seem contradictory that racial or ethnic groups would be looking inwards in this era of global democracy that promotes co-existence and tolerance in man. However, the phobia bred by a fast expanding horizon tends to drive man to seek, with a pathological fear, the refuge of a tiny exclusive world that he could call his own.

Consequently, the wave of democratic rule in post-independence Nigeria has resulted in intense ethnic consciousness among the citizens. Small ethnic groups aspired and agitated for Local Government units, States, even nations of their own. In the process, ethnic origins and exclusive cultural practices were evoked with the view of creating and sustaining separatist consciousness. Such was the case, to some extent with the defunct Kwami Local Government curved out of Gombe. With the announcement of a proposed Local Government, the community immediately went out vigorously with activities to prove its worth as the right host for the unit's political and administrative centre. Long forgotten Kwami customs were revisited in an effort to resuscitate the community's self-pride. For the first time several Kwami youths came to learn more about the abandoned or forgotten rituals of *gajere*, *gokka abari*, *gwani konong* and *jingale*.

More recent socio-political experiences that followed in the wake of the process of democratisation have triggered a return to the roots in Kwami. The incident of referred to in the opening of this paper, namely the rituals of *gajere* as sought by the *auni*, was intended to empower Kwami community to out-do its traditional political rivals in a bid to host, once more, the centre for a proposed District Development Area. When also the *auni* organised the inauguration of his



decade's-old reign<sup>3</sup> in 1992, the occasion was marked by similar cultural activities.

Thus, once more, even as the wave of democracy expands the people's horizon, it simultaneously initiates a process of self-withdrawal among them. If this familiar 20th century trend prevails, *ngamdo*, a withering seed sown in the Kwami community at its inception, will thrive and blossom in the near future. However, *ngamdo* revival must be hoped for against natural and human developmental trends in the environment. Provision of water, especially for agricultural purposes, which is the objective of *ngamdo*, is receiving a boost in the lower Benue River Valley. It is anticipated that Kwami district, among others, will benefit from irrigation facilities planned for a giant dam project, sited some 30 - 50 kilometres from Kwami town.

In a haste for the anticipated dam project, Kwami community has already had constructed, early in 1992, a communal earth dam in the northern outskirts of the town. Already, this has considerably improved the level of water supply to the town in the dry season, and has brought a boost in the well-being of the population.

The foregoing developments which are results of man's intervention in topography and ecology in the environment are complemented by natural changes. In recent years, a phenomenon of flood which threatens to wash away a good part of the town is recorded every rainy season. In addition to improving water supply for agricultural purposes, the flood water forms the back-borne of the community earth dam. The flood water is also an evidence of improved rainfall in the region, and together with improved agricultural prospects, this development mitigates against a *ngamdo* revival. Nevertheless, the cultural front being stronger than people's desire for material improvement, the revival of *ngamdo* in Kwami is still feasible.

Kwami is a community that is very proud of its name and identity, both of which cannot be separated from its culture. For example, like any traditional African community, Kwami rejects any imposed change in its identity. Such a rejection to changes in names among Africans is recorded earlier in the 18th century African slave writings such as the case of Olaudah Equino, otherwise known as Gustavas Vassa. Famous African writers of this century such as the Nigerian Chinua Achebe and Kenyan Ngugi Wa Thiongo remind us, through their experiences, that a change in name amounts to a denial of self-dignity and an absolute sub-ordination of the self.

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<sup>3</sup> Alhaji Usman Abubakar, the new Emir of Gombe asked all his village heads who had not inaugurated their tenure, irrespective of how long they had been on the throne, to do so.

Prior to the advent of the Fulani Jihadists and the British colonialists into the region, there was no substitute to "Kwami" as a name of the town or its people. However, the name Kafarati was introduced sometime in the 19th century, presumably by the jihadist forces of Buba Yero, the founder of the Fulani section of Gombe. The new name was not accepted by the people and was consequently not integrated into their language of daily communication. The growing resistance to the objectionable new name in the community culminated in 1978 in the official change of name from Kafarati to "Kwami". The community sponsored a newspaper advertisement to publicise its return to an original name.

Members of Kwami community have been and would only like to be regarded as *miyan Kwami* ("people of Kwami") living in Kwami town speaking *fog Kwami*. Thus the Kwami expression *fog Kwami gina* (lit. "mouth Kwami wealth") to hint on the people's pride and their regard for an inestimable wealth in the Kwami identity is made ever more current against any foreign appellation. We are once again reminded of the special significance given to names, especially in pre-literate and developing societies by D. Avorgbedor in his article on the "Dynamics of Ewe Names" in Ghana:

"Names function at both social and psychic levels, and this dual function is necessary in societies where the material and non-material aspects of man's constitution are acknowledged (Folklore Forum, Vol. 16, 1983).

*Kwami* is both the name and a word in the language of the people of Kwami town. Indeed Kwami is the adjective to describe anything that is exclusively associated with the community. As a name it has an opacity that only intensifies the denotation of its object of reference. As a word however, Kwami has a density of meaning which is continuously enriched by recent linguistic researchers. In the course of his Ph.D research, Dr. R. Leger has deduced a new etymology for the word *Kwami*.

For us natives of Kwami, the town's name originated from the social reality of thirst (also called *kwami*) which has been associated with the place from its foundation. When therefore Dr. Leger suggested to me that Kwami is *kumi ami* (lit. "Hunger for water") I could only marvel at the new knowledge.

The story is often told of a thirsty splinter Bolewa group that followed the telepathic guide of its leader's horse to dig a well and settle at the present site of Kwami<sup>4</sup> after years of searching for water. Lugon Falta, the first water well dug by the migrant community has not dried up today, but even with several water wells subsequently dug after it, Kwami is yet to enjoy sufficient water supply.

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<sup>4</sup> *Lugon Falta*, the water well at the centre of Kwami appears to have been there from the beginning of time. It was the spot of settlement in Kwami.

There were several unsuccessful attempts at constructing a borehole, a modern source of water supply and new sources of underground water are still being sought in Kwami. Even with the recent annual phenomenon of flood and the construction of an earth dam, the Kwami community's search and need for water is far from being satisfied.

Metaphorically then, Kwami (town and community) appears destined to *kwami* (thirst and hunger) especially for knowledge and education for which members of that community are already noted in the region.

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The following people have kindly answered my questions and made available to me some basic information compiled in the paper:

1. Adda Yayi, elder woman, family neighbour in Kwami.
2. Baba Fatu, elder woman, my paternal Aunt.
3. Jibir Kwami (Baba), an uncle in Bauchi
4. Muhammed Sule, Kwami undergraduate in Bayero University, Kano, Nigeria.
5. Nuhu Idris, Kwami undergraduate in Bayero University, Kano, Nigeria.