

RITUALS AND CEREMONIES ACCOMPANYING RAINMAKING AMONG THE GURUNTUM AND BUBBURE PEOPLE *

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Abstract

As farmers, the entire livelihood of the Guruntun and Bubbure people depend on rain. Rain is seen as the most significant demonstration of the goodness and providence of God and whenever it falls the people rejoice (unless it damages crops or causes harmful flooding).

This paper therefore describes and explains some of the important events that are observed during prayer for rain among the Guruntun and the Bubbure people of Alkaleri Local Government Area, Bauchi State, Nigeria. Similarities were drawn between the Guruntun and the Bubbure people with other neighbouring tribes and with Middle Eastern/Biblical practices. These similarities are so striking that the most natural question to ask would probably be how did these Middle Eastern/Biblical beliefs and practices come into Guruntun and Bubbure land, or could these tribes which claim to have come from the east be the missing tribe of Judah (Israel)? In conclusion, to answer this question properly, the paper addresses itself to an area which calls for interdisciplinary co-operation between the geographer, anthropologist, linguist, historian and the theologian.

Keywords: rainmaking, rituals, religion, Guruntun, Bubbure, Bauchi State, Nigeria.

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1. Introduction

"As for me, I would seek God, and to him would, I commit my cause [...] he gives rain upon the earth and sends water upon the fields" (Job 5:8 & 10).

From the above quoted scripture passage, this source of blessing to man (rain in all its forms: water etc.) came from God himself, from the heavens. Therefore when rain is needed heaven is thus invoked for rainfall. Sacrifices and prayers are usually offered either directly to God or through an intermediary. Such intermediaries are believed to possess certain powers of an invisible force (the spirit power) which could be used for the benefit of mankind.

The present paper investigates some of the religious aspects i.e. beliefs and practices of the Guruntun and Bubbure people pertaining to rain. It has threefold purposes: firstly, to contribute to the documentation of the Guruntun and Bubbure people by presenting their rituals and ceremonies pertaining to rain. Secondly, to demonstrate how such a study can be used as a source material for the study of not only the Guruntun and Bubbure people but also of the other tribes of the Lake Chad region. Thirdly, the aspects of life of these people are a reality which calls for academic investigation and which must be reckoned with in modern fields like agriculture and activities involving man's control over his environment. To ignore these traditional beliefs, attitudes and practices can only lead to lack of understanding of the people's behaviour and problems. This is because as Mbiti says:

"Wherever the African is there is his religion: he carries it to the fields whether he is sowing seeds or harvesting a new crop [...] if he is educated, he takes religion with him to the examination room [...]" (MBITI 1988:2).

The approach in this paper is chiefly descriptive and interpretive pointing out those areas or elements which are symbolic or representative of many traditional beliefs. The Guruntun (majority of whom live in Pali and Duguri districts, cf. HARUNA 1982 & JAGGAR 1988) and Bubbure (majority of whom live in Bure of Kirfi district) are two of the many ethnic groups or tribes in Alkaleri Local Government Area (L.G.A.) of Bauchi State, Nigeria. These ethnic groups speak the languages of Guruntun and Bubbure which are both members of the West Chadic B Group (NEWMAN 1977).

Like many other tribes of Northern Nigeria, they claim to have come from the east – around the Lake Chad (cf. HARUNA forthcoming). Each of these tribes has its rituals although sometimes very similar to those of the other groups. The "Gyual" clan (of Tora) among the seven clans of Guruntun and the "Kolo" clan among the three clans of Bubbure are said to be the rainmakers. As rainmakers they have traditional power which subdivides into religious and political power.

Political power (domination) translates as dependency on rain-maker or water-giver, hence giving superiority over the other clans. As political leaders they have a special class of their own and enjoy the power and authority above that of any other single clan. As spiritual leaders people regard them as God's earthly viceroys. They exercise their supernatural power only at the request of the other clans and/or neighbouring tribes.

2. Rainmaking Ritual/Ceremony Among the Guruntun People

Each of the seven clans among the Guruntun tribe has its own "spiritual" leader for all matters except that of making rain¹. The priest (also the "chief high priest") who makes rain comes from one of the clans called Gyual from Tora. He is called *Vurlimbo* in the language – "the man who does not tell a lie". The spiritual leader is usually an old man who is respected by the community and one who has great deal of knowledge about the climatic conditions of the area. During drought two types of prayers are offered to bring rain depending on the severity of the drought. During slight drought only one clan goes to the rainmaker. The prayer for rain is offered under a baobab tree. The spirits of the ancestors find the baobab tree as a place of abode because it is one of the trees which can stand all kinds of harsh weather condition. It has deep roots which allows it to get water from deep water levels, hence it does not dry up easily. The deep roots also makes it withstand strong storms/winds. Its trunk (usually with a cave) is used as a shelter from scorching heat of the sun. One may therefore not be wrong to speculate that the baobab is considered as a sacred tree because it symbolises the deep rootedness of the people to withstand the storms of life of which drought is one of them. During severe drought when crops and animals are dying, prayer for rain is offered on top of a flat rock (the rock is associated with rain/water, see below). When visiting the "chief high priest" – *Vurlimbo* elders and spiritual heads of the other clans accompanied by their people carry all sorts of assorted foods, like *dambu*, *gwate*, *gakaiwa*, *kunu*² etc. to him. They wear sackcloth and rags and cover themselves with ashes (this has an ancient origin during prayers of penitence, see note 13). They beat drums, empty tins, calabashes and blow horns.

¹ Among the spiritual leaders on general matters from all the clans – Yalmanza who comes from the Gulaba clan is their head/leader.

² *Dambu*, *gwate*, *gakaiwa* and *kunu* are traditional foods made of local food stuff.

On arrival at the house of *Vurlimbo*, the people are made to sit on a flat rock (*Fa*)³. One of the visiting elders then goes to him to officially inform him of their mission. After the briefing, *Vurlimbo* then comes out to meet the people. He usually wears a tiger's skin, two thin ropes tied round his forehead and in his hand a staff of office with a string of horse hair tied at its top⁴. He stands before the people and says: "After hearing your request through your spiritual leader – Yelmanza [head of the general priests] I have come to speak to you". *Vurlimbo* then makes a brief address to the people after which he commands them to go and purge themselves of any known sin(s) committed against one another, their ancestors, nature, the environment and God.

Lack of rain is usually associated with sin. The sin committed against the environment is usually that of cutting down sacred trees and grasses which are believed to preserve moisture in the *fadamas* during prolonged drought. Some of the sacred trees are baobab, date-palm and fig tree; sacred grasses are *gamba* (tall grass used in making *zana* mats etc.) and *jima* (type of grass that grows in marshy areas' *fadamas*). The root of these grasses traps manure and reduces soil erosion during flooding. The grasses also serve as shelter belts that reduce and influence the rates and quantity of evapotranspiration which in turn affects temperatures of an area⁵. The people also believed that small lakes which are usually covered with *kainuwa* (a type of grass that grows on water) are not to be allowed to dry up by too much fishing and gathering of the *kainuwa*. These vegetations are capable of supporting agriculture in normal years and the people know this. They plant them as shelter belts round the *fadamas* and small lakes, hence control the seasons: dry and wet seasons.

When the people have confessed their sins (i.e. purified themselves), *Vurlimbo* then leads them to a special location (usually under a baobab tree, [see above] or on top of a flat rock [see note 4]). The ritual is held around such locations because the locations are considered as "sacred abode of the spirits" that give

³ The people believe that rock is one of the ancient sources of water (Numbers 20:11) and its water never dries up.

⁴ It is an ancient tradition for priests to carry a rod/staff when performing their duties. It is a symbol of authority, both human (Judges 5:14) and divine, like Moses' rod (Exodus 4:20) and Aaron's which confirm the Levitical priesthood (Numbers 17; Hebrews 19:4).

⁵ Most ecologists believe that there is a connection between the reduction of vegetation cover by human and animals and the drying up of surface water-lakes. This cause of drought due to some human and animals actions has been allegedly proved for the Sudano-Sahelian zones of West Africa. (cf. DEVITT 1973).

rain. It is also believed among the Hausa that such ritual festival performances must take place in special locations which one considered as abode of the spirits or supernatural forces so as to ensure their effective response or intervention. For instance, the ritual performance of *fashin-ruwa* "breaking of the water" so practised in Argungu, Kebbi State, Nigeria, was usually referred to *Ma fashan ruwa* (it is a sacred spot of a stream where ritual of the annual fishing festival in Argungu is performed, see KOFOWOROLA et al. 1987). At this special location Vurlimbo leads them in a special prayer of repentance. The prayer is offered in the name of a white spirit called *Bisin ndai*. After the prayers, the people are then asked to eat all that they have cooked sharing it with one another. Some of the food is left at the location for the people's ancestors. The actual eating must take place on top of a rock (see note 3). Animals are not sacrificed. After eating and drinking, Vurlimbo once again leads the people in another special congregational prayer which this time is accompanied by a choral response from the people. He prays as follows:

In ba kem lin ban sin "Bisin ndai". I am calling upon the name of God
in the name of the white angel.

In ba kem lin ban sin baba nga. I am calling upon the name of God
in the name of our ancestors.

In ba kem lin ban sin lin. I am calling upon the name of God
in the name of God.

Si lin nem ka byau gen. May God hear our request.

*Kafin ke yabi bai si von gyu ka
asan ge sen.⁶* Before we depart from here may
rain fall upon ourfoot steps.

The people reply:

Si lin nem ka byau gu. May God answer your prayer

Si Bisin ndai nem ka byau gu. May the white angel also hear your
prayer

⁶ The prayer quoted here was sung to me by Mal. Haruna Sh. Buri. It can be compared with Elijah's prayer during his contest with the prophets of Ba'al on mount Carmel. Elijah prayed to God in the name of Abraham, Isaac and Israel to send fire from heaven to consume the sacrifice he made to him (cf. 1 Kings 18:36-37).

Si ba gen nem ka byau gu.

And may our forefathers hear your prayer.

At this point, Vurlimbo then withdraws to a small room specially built for him for offering prayers on behalf of others⁷. At the end of the secret prayer, Vurlimbo then goes to the people to inform them of the answer to their request.

He once again makes a short speech (see high priest's speech, sec. 4) before sending the people home. If God has answered their prayer, rain begins to fall immediately and when there is too much rain it is the high Priest who stops it. It is worthy to note that the rainmaker does not make rain during the dry season.

3. Rainmaking Ritual/Ceremony Among the Bubbure People

The Bubbure also believe that rain comes from Providence and that he gives it at will. When rain fails to come, it is a sign that God has abandoned the people either because of a sin they committed against him or their ancestors or against nature (see sec. 2). At such times the people usually turn to traditional belief and worship. All the clans (there are three clans) declare a day of cleansing and prayer (this is called: "cleansing of the town": *wankar tuba*). Such rituals are held generally at such locations as under (or inside a cave of) a baobab tree (see sec. 2) or on top of a flat rock (see note 4) or at the side of a small lake⁸ where sacred animals like *guza* "water monitor", *kado* "crocodile", and *mesa* "python" live (cf. note 10). The chief high priest who makes rain is called *Adamba* – "the man who carries the weight of society". He does not make rain unless he is asked to. He also stands between the people and their ancestors and God.

On the day a prayer for rain is to be said the people dress in sackcloth, and rags and cover their bodies with ashes (see note 12). They carry with them to *Adamba* the gifts of *aya* "a root crop that looks like raisin in its dry form", groundnut, *gujiya* "bambara nut", and fried *nomi* "beniseed".

⁷ It has not been possible to have access to this secret prayer. It must be pointed out that since "Rainmakers" are special people in the community, they have a language, symbolism, knowledge, skills and practice of their own which are not easily revealed to the ordinary person or scholar in search for knowledge. This means that there is a great deal of information to be gathered and made available to the public.

⁸ Riverine areas are believed to be abode of water spirits, e.g. *Sarkin rafi* "King of the River" among the Hausa refers to water spirit and also *Ayu* a spirit living in water.

As they go to the house of Adamba, they sing songs of praise and request, calling upon him to save their land. In the songs they also remind Adamba of the virtues of his ancestors and their help to the community and that he (Adamba) should not disappoint them. A verse from one of the songs goes like this:

<i>Ba Adamba ka memo.</i>	Adamba this problem is beyond us.
<i>Ba Adamba ka nootmo.</i>	Adamba hear our prayer and help us.
<i>Ba Adamba ka in fito.</i>	Adamba the rainmaker.
<i>Ba Adamba ka mu ge dal fito.</i>	Adamba give us rain.
<i>Joni har tim asale.</i>	This special gift is an inheritance.
<i>Joni tintim asale.</i>	You should not allow the name of your family to be wasted or ridiculed ⁹ .

Adamba then collects the gifts brought to him and offers them to the sacred animals¹⁰. A black goat and a cock (whose meats are not eaten) are also slaughtered for sacrifice to the ancestors and the spirits. Apart from the sacred animals mentioned earlier, there are other sacred treasures of the community which are believed to be associated with rain.

They are sacred trees: namely *bar-magajiya* (a type of tree that looks like a fig tree), *baure* "fig tree", baobab and sacred grasses: namely *jima* and *gamba*. The Bachama in Numan L.G.A., Adamawa state, also believe that water comes from a grass called *mwere* (cf. DATTI 1990:2). Sacred lakes which serve as an abode of the sacred animals and also the spirits of the people's ancestors are also guarded carefully to stop them from drying up. God is said to drink from these lakes and when he drinks enough he sends some to earth as rain.

⁹ This song was sung to me by Rev. Ahmadu Allahbura, a speaker of Bubbure and a native of Bure.

¹⁰ These animals are associated in pre-islamic and pre-christian beliefs of the Bubbure people with the spirits which are some of the active beings which directly influence (supernatural forces) to provide solutions to such form of human crisis as draught and famine. As sacred animals they are believed to keep lakes and rivers from drying up and in times of severe draught they bring rain.

4. The High Priest's Concluding Speech and Injunctions

At about 5 to 6 pm (in both cultures), towards evening, the public ritual or ceremony is concluded with a special speech by the chief high priest – *Vurlimbo/Adamba*. In the speech the people's ancestors are esteemed above all other beings, and the people are warned against: anger, violence or fighting (except fighting an enemy). Any ill-feeling must be left at the praying ground and no one should go back to the village bearing grudges. Adultery and theft are condemned. Killing or hunting sacred animals is prohibited, sacred grasses and trees must not be uprooted and small lakes or ponds must be religiously guarded to stop them from drying up.

In this speech, the gods and the people's ancestors are charged not to turn their back on the people for if they do, poverty, lack of sufficient food (the consequence of drought), death, etc. will be in the land. They are appealed to restore those good old days of bumper harvest and plenty of food. Having observed all that is required of them by the gods in the rituals, the people will then start to go home while waiting for the gods and ancestors to fulfil their own obligation. To show their satisfaction, with what has been done, the gods are believed to send rain before the people reach their villages (and if it delays, rain falls the next day).

5. Guruntun and Bubbure Rainmaking Ceremonies and Ancient Antecedents

Rainmaking ceremonies and rituals of the Guruntun and Bubbure people suggest close similarities with those of the Bachama (cf. DATTI 1990), the Bura (fieldwork interviews), the Karai-Karai (cf. HASSAN forthcoming), and the Tangale (cf. ABDULLAHI 1991). All these ethnic groups speak Chadic languages. The Bura (Borno state, Nigeria) example will be given as a representative of the groups. Many similarities can also be drawn from general religious practices in the Middle East during biblical times. The semblance is more striking when we consider the rock as one of the sources of water.

The Guruntun and Bubbure people have a strong belief that the rock is a source of water and even rain, that is why when they visit the Chief high Priest to seek for rain they are made to sit on a flat rock. The stone (which is associated with rain/water) is also an item of worship and prayer for rain among the Bura. Among the Bura, two types of prayers are offered depending on the severity of the drought. During slight drought, village elders and spiritual leaders (priests) gather themselves to pray for rain in a small forest called *Melem*. They go to the forest in procession singing (see song below), beating drums and empty calabashes. They carry along with them gifts of food and animals (goats and cock) for sacrifice. The people sing the following song:

<i>hyel ni ke ta tsa di ka ddirwa.</i>	The clouds have formed but it is not thundering.
<i>Oh... oh... oh... hyel ragai.</i>	Oh... oh... oh... dear God.
<i>Ani yimi kaka, Ani yimi ka yeru sa.</i>	Give us water grandfather, give us water to drink.
<i>Oh... oh... oh... hyeltidda.</i>	Oh... oh... oh... God our father.
<i>Oh... oh... oh... hyelmthaku.</i>	Oh... oh... oh... God the originator of things (repeat) ¹¹ .

During severe drought rather than beating drums and/or empty calabashes, the elders and priests carry two stones in their hands which they hit against each other. The stones are believed to symbolize extra power which brings rain (personal interview with Dr. S.K. Msheliza a Bura speaker from Shaffa).

In biblical times, God (through Moses) provided water for the Israelites from a rock (when they murmured and grumbled) in the deserts of Sin and Zin. God said to Moses: "[...] strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, that the people may drink" (Exodus 17:5-6, see also Numbers 20:10b-11).

Consequently the search for water through lakes and streams could be compared with the experience of Elijah in the wilderness when there was severe drought in Samaria. God provided him with water from a brook. And the Lord said to Elijah: "[...] hide yourself by the brook Cherith, that is east of Jordan. You shall drink from the brook [...]" (1 Kings 17:2-4).

Another point of comparison with Biblical times is the people's identification of drought as a sign that God had abandoned his people due to their sins. For example, during the reign of King Ahab (when Elijah was the prophet) God sent a severe drought in the land (as a punishment) because of the evil deeds Ahab committed (1 Kings 16:30-31). And because of Ahab's idolatry, God sent Elijah to pronounce punishment on his kingdom. And Elijah spoke the following words:

"As the Lord, the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word" (1 Kings 17:1b).

Even in contemporary times, lack of rain has been associated with society's evil deeds. People inhabiting the Chad basin in Nigeria and their counterparts in the semi-arid northern Nigeria view drought as a climatic aberration rather than being endemic to the climate of the region. This view is not only shared by traditional societies but also by present-day governments of the various states.

¹¹ This song was sung to me by Dr. S.K. Msheliza.

WATTS (1983:131) observed that "rain rituals, rites and prayers – many of which are now moribund – were commonplace among Muslims (Hausa). Among Islamic communities (Hausa), a preferred rite was a "water chase" *farautar ruwa*, exclusively effected by married women and seen as an act of ritual purification in which the drought was clearly endowed with a moral etiology."

NICHOLAS (1975:394) had earlier made a similar observation. He comments that "In the towns and cities, all the married women, without exception, must participate in the ceremony. Unmarried women must have husbands and prostitutes are chased out. This action appears a positive right designed to produce rain [...], and the exclusion of prostitutes corresponds to an act of purification." In my village too (I am Guruntun speaker), the people attributed the late rains of 1984 and 1985 to be due to too many children born out of wedlock and the presence of many widows.

For instance, recently, both modern and traditional governments in northern Nigeria have called people out for rain prayer when rains failed to come at expected time. During the period 1985-92, there were calls for rain prayer in the churches and mosques in Maiduguri. These calls were either in response to drought when agriculture appeared threatened by lack of rains or for early and adequate rains at the beginning of the agricultural calendar. These confessional and supplicatory prayers suggest a link between immorality and apostasy with drought, on the one hand, and divine pardon or religious fidelity and rain on the other hand (cf. ODIHI 1988).

The idea of the rainmaker, too, is not only found in the Guruntun and Bubbure societies. The *Sarkin-ruwa* "king of the water" is found among the Hausa. In Biblical times Elijah and Moses could also be said to be rainmakers (see above). The tradition of wearing sackcloth¹², rags, and covering one's body with ashes as a sign of public confession of sin against God is also not peculiar to Guruntun and Bubbure people. It is practiced among the Buras and it was practiced in Israel and Damascus:

"And the Israelites separated themselves [...] and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their forefathers [...] with fasting and in sackcloth, and with earth upon their heads." (Nehemiah 9:1&2, see also Matthew 11:21, 1 Kings 20:31 and Isaiah 15:3)

What of the idea of carrying the rod/staff of office? This could not be said to be peculiar to the Guruntun and Bubbure priests alone. Moses as a spiritual leader always carried along with him a rod. He used a rod to provide water for

¹² Sackcloth was worn as a sign of mourning for personal or national disaster or of penitence for sin (1 Kings 21:27; Nehemiah 9:1 & 2 and Matthew 11:21).

the Israelites (cf. Exodus 17:5-6, and Numbers 20:10b-11. Pharaoh's magicians also used a magical rod (cf. Exodus 7:12).

6. Observations

A careful examination of the situation amongst the two tribes under study shows that:

1. Through modern education or value many of the traditional beliefs of the people are distorted, changed or partially abandoned, but they are by no means extinct.
2. Since the people are intimately bound to their traditional beliefs and outlook, major changes in the weather cause a revival of religious activities or creation of new ones. In other words, the people still see misfortune as religious experiences. Disasters or calamities, like drought, famine and the like are still considered the consequence of someone's or the community's sin.
3. The belief in the providence of the "Sky God" is still strong and current. Prayers are offered to him through the name of the people's ancestors and when he gives rain, only the ancestors are thanked.
4. Rainmakers are some of the specialists in the society and they have a great deal of respect because of their knowledge about climatic conditions of the area. They are to be respected as persons and for their positions. It is only by approaching them with such an attitude and spirit of humility that the scholar or the scientist may hope to have access to their specialized knowledge.
5. The profession of the rainmaker is likely to continue for many more generations to come¹³.
6. It will be an over generalization to think that everything traditional amongst the Guruntun and the Bubbure people is an innovation and that there are no traces found in antiquity. In fact very little has changed from time immemorial, and even the very little, it only affects the physical and concrete side of life.
7. These rituals have a lot of sociological functions. Apart from the unity of purpose during the time of need, the young are introduced to the beliefs of their parents and other assimilable information about the surrounding world to prepare them for adult life. Similarly the community is educated and reminded that the destruction of the environment can cause serious imbalance in climatic conditions.

¹³ In the cities their role is being taken over by religious leaders (pastor/imam).

7. Conclusion

This paper has attempted to describe and explain most of the important events that are observed during prayer for rain among the Guruntun and the Bubbure people. Similarities were drawn between the Guruntun and the Bubbure people with other neighbouring tribes and with Middle Eastern and biblical practices. These similarities are so striking, that the most natural question to ask at this juncture would probably be, how did these Middle Eastern and biblical beliefs and practices come into Guruntun and Bubbure land, or could these tribes which claim to have come from the east be the missing tribe of Judah (Israel)? Unfortunately, our written records of the migratory movements and religions of many tribes of the Lake Chad basin is very scanty and because of this, it is therefore impossible at this stage to describe their history. But to answer this question properly is an area of study which calls for interdisciplinary co-operation between the geographer, anthropologist, linguist, historian and the theologian.

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