RAIN AND POWER
RAIN MAKING AS A POLITICAL DISCOURSE AMONG THE KAPSIKI[1]

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The rains had come, and gone too soon. The young crops on the field, the tender Sorghum and Pennicetum sprouts, withered in the scorching sun. The month of May started with some beautiful showers, but June dried up. In Gouria, one of the Kapsiki villages along the border with Nigeria, the older men discuss the problem at the *kelungu*, the stone benches under one of the rare fig trees in the village. "Time to sacrifice the *melè va*", someone ventures, and most agree. However, the rainmaker, Cakereda, will have to be convinced: "He does not like to be commanded in his *melè* (jar)", one chief's councelor points out, "any time we speak him about it, he resists; according to him he alone commands the jar". Still, it has to be done, so the elders set out to Cakereda's hut, with one white chicken. As expected, Cakereda is reluctant, but promises to have the sacrifice performed the next morning, just before the Gouria market.

The next day, the elder brings along a red rooster, as the divination has indicated so, and me. The rainmaker is pleased with my presence, as white people are considered kinsmen of the rain, and he knows me well by now. So this time his reluctance is slight; with some gusto he tells me that formerly the elders had to beat him into performing the sacrifice, thus underscoring his own importance in the village.

The sacrifice itself follows roughly the general pattern of Kapsiki sacrifices. Central in the proceedings is the jar of the rain, *melè va*, reported to stem from Gudur, together with Cakereda's lineage. A smal hut, the *ce va*, houses it, with some other paraphernalia: a small jar, some odd shaped stones and six irregular lumps of clay. According to Cakereda all stem from the almost mythical village Gudur, where his ancestor was the brother of the chief of Gudur, the greatest chief in the wide region and a rainmaker of huge repute.

In the early morning, three *ntsu*, hollow stones (meules dormantes) close to the entrance of the rain hut, are ritually washed with sesamum stems and water.

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Cakereda pours some of the water on the doorstep of the rain hut: "We are thirsty, we are thirsty". Then he takes all paraphernalia from the hut, and puts them on the ground, next to the hollow stones. The village chief, the *mnzefè* (the village priest) and the chief black smith join us at the *cè va*.

Seated on one of the lumps of clay, the village chief takes the red rooster and Cakereda cut its throat, the blood dripping on the jars, stones and clay:

"Shala ta rhweme, menehwete zhèhwu ta ndere 'ya, nahe 'ya ndeke wusu kazeme nganga, mpi deve va rha: ndeke mu yèmu kawuza ha; mba na kepetleke wundu le hwa, kaḍe dlè 'ya we"	"God in heaven, I suffer from thirst, now I have given you to eat; I ask you, give us water to cultivate our sorgo, do not stab anyone with your knife [lightning], I do not want any jealousy".

The bloodied objects are put back in the hut, the door shut. Again the rainmaker laves the hollow stones with sesamum water. During the ritual, the market gets into a good swing. Cakereda's hut borders on the market place, but nobody else takes any notice, engrossed in buying, drinking and playing "*caca*", a game of hazards with cowri shells. At dusk Cakereda's wife cooks millet mush and broils the rooster. The village officials long gone, the rainmaker and I terminate the ritual. He takes the jars and stones from the hut, and smears mush, sauce and chicken liver on each of them as well as on the hut:

"Shala, a 'ya ndere 'ya, nde nganga kezeme, kwelènge ng'yè, ndeke Da yèmu ha"	"God, I am thirsty, here is food for you, let us be healthy, give us water to cultivate sorgo".

Some *hangedle va* (Cissus quadrangularis) is put on the main jar, then everything is put back in the hut. The rest of the food is eaten by the rainmaker.

The ritual was effective, well timed or both. Towards the evening some clouds gathered, and when the many visitors from neighbouring Mogodé started home, showers met them on the road. To the delight of the Gouria people, the rains fell only on Gouria fields, very little in other villages. For me, of course, a very lucky result: "*Va* (rain) has respected the white man; he should from now on allways help our rainmaker", and Cakereda since that time, till his death some five years later, called me "*wuzeyitiyeda*", son of the same father. Still, I have been hesitant to try my luck again, having "dined out" so long on this incidental success as an assistant rainmaker.

This ritual is called "buying rain" (the rainmaker does receive a small remuneration), and is the standard procedure for procuring rain in two thirds of the Kapsiki villages. That is, the villages of Sirakouti, Gouria, Gwava, Liri, Wula, Tlukwu and Muzuku have resident rainmakers, 16 other villages come to

them for the ritual. In almost all these cases rainmakers claimed descent for Gudur, though some trace this through Sukur. These two principal ritual spots, important in many ways in the region, still hold the most important powers in collective survival. Not only rain, but also the ritual against locusts, as well as the control over leopards are situated in Gudur (also called Mcakelè.)

Despite this ritual eminence of Gudur, in one third of the villages, rain is not "bought" but "hunted". Gouria's neighbour Mogodé may serve as an example for hunting rain.

As Mogodé indeed did not get rain, a *peli va* (rain hunt) had to be staged. The village of Mogodé, according to its founding myth, is not allowed to "buy rain".

> Its culture hero, Hwempetla, has stated just before his death, that no one should trust a rainmaker (*ndemeva*). "Only *shala* can give or withhold rain, so after my death I shall go to *shala* and ask for rain. And whenever you need rain, you come to my tomb and pray for it.

When the elders have decided on the date, the village chief cries out in the evening before, that nobody is to cultivate his fields: no hoe should touch the earth, because we shall "search for" the rain.

On the morrow some 50 youngsters gather at the northern outskirts of the village, more or less led by the leader of the ritual first hunt. They follow about the same route as the first hunt, done in January, starting in a North Western direction, turning right towards the South East, in order to come back through the South towards the village. The parcours is filled with small rituals. First the disbanded home of a former rainmaker is visited; his name is forgotten now; during the Fulani wars of the last century he had to flee and his jar (his connection with power over rain) was destroyed. He too, was a direct descendant from Gudur. His grave, next to his old *kwefi* (house ruins), is the first goal of the hunting party. All men take some branches (from any kind of tree), and swinging branches, sticks and clubs, they run towards the grave, shouting "*a 'ya ndere 'ya, a 'ya ndere 'ya*" (I am thirsty, I am thirsty) and cover the grave with leaves. A few young men then take their *zuvu* (open flute) to accompany the chant "*Kwaftia Magweda*" (I am a real Mogodé man, who eats yellow sorgo). The house ruins are treated the same way.

The next stop is towards the North East. On a *kelungu*, ward gathering place, a hollow stone has to be washed with *tè*, red beer. This seems to be a recent addition to the program. Only this generation people have built their homes in this formerly dangerous place (too accessible for mounted slave raiders); one of them started to lave this stone with beer during their ward sacrifice "just for fun", and as seemed to procure rain, he kept doing so. Now the whole village does it for him. Close to his home, a high boulder, split in two halves, is one of the high

points of the hunt. The crevace in the rock is filled with fresh leaves, after the old ones have been taken out. The men are careful lest no lizard climbs the rock: "When one male lizard from the top of *Kwajamca* [rock of the male lizard] looks in the direction of the rain, the rain will not come." They kill one male lizard and bury it at the foot of the boulder, singing "*kwaberhewuzha*", a song sung at the burial of an old person. *Kwabelèha* (whiskers), a granite stone with a surprising rim of yellow stone, then has to be secured standing; this stone, risen out of the earth like that, has to stand; if it falls, rain will not come. Again, like the others, this stone is covered with leaves, accompanied by the same songs.

After a visit to the *kwefi* of some Mata Kweji Yarhwè, who has been responsible for a ritual against a millet parasite, the main goal of the hunt is in sight. A place called *shala* (god) houses the graves of the Mogodé culture hero Hwempetla and his wife. Surrounded by hollow stones, two high tombs mark the place where these two have come to rest after their flight from the shoulders of the blacksmiths. Much higher that the usual Kapsiki tombs, they stand out, even between the many trees that dot this swampy place. It is one of Mogodé's sacred places, with the old village on top of *Rhungedu*. Both tombs are totally covered with an additional layer of fresh leaves; some months ago the same has been done during the village sacrifice on the sacred mountain; all hollow stones are washed with red beer, when all the men circle the tombs, singing "I am thirsty, I am thirsty". Now their number has grown, as many have joined them towards the end of their journey, for this is the high point of the ritual, the central expression of the thirst of the village, their privileged way to the ear of *shala*. After half an hour, the singing and dancing continues at the foot of the sacred mountain, residence of Hwempetla (and all of Mogodé in former times).

This time success was not evident: no rain came; maybe I should not have joined them this time. Anyway, while the wind abated, no rain fell for a week. The village chief asked the new village priest to climb the sacred mountain and wash the stones up there. He refused, scared to fall when climbing before dusk. He was the rightful inheritor of the ritual on Rhungedu indeed, but after his father's recent death he had not yet climbed the mountain. So the chief asked Teri Kuve to perform the ritual. Teri is not a "real Mogodé man" (in fact he is the son of a former immigrant), but he does trace descent from a rainmaker in Wula - anyway, he stems from Gudur, so can never be called a "foreigner". He did perform the ritual, and for the rest of the week proudly paraded the village, as a nice shower wetted the village on the same day. Exactly the way it should be: "The one who washes the stones at Rhungedu, never returns home dry".

Rain and the narrow margin of human interference

Central in the rituals cited above are a few core notions about rain and rain making. In fact, the term rain making is not very apt; whereas the Kapsiki use "buying rain" the main notion is not so much that the rainmaker (we shall continue calling him so, anyway) produces rain; what the ritual does, is to eliminate all reasons that may prohibit the rain from coming. First of all, the notion of rain as a person is important. In the central Mogodé myth, the culture hero Hwempetla meets the rain in person, though this part of the mythic corpus shows some features of a folk tale (in fact a similar folktale tells about the ground squirrel):

> Hwempetla, now a young adult, wants to marry the daughter of Rain. He tries to steal her, but everytime he makes an effort, Rain starts to grumble. At last Rain asks Hwempetla: "Why do you want to steal my offspring. If you would succeed, the rains will never stop and devour your little piece of ground, tearing it apart. Is that what you want? You stay down there, I remain aloft, going from one village to another." Hwempetla, who still wants the girl, strikes a bet with Rain: he wants a favour if he can hide himself from Rain for eight days. Thus is done. Hwempetla then hides between the grains (couch) in a beer jar in Rain's own compound. Rain searches all the earth, tearing houses asunder, striking at trees, in mice burrows, termite hills, under rocks and boulders. Tired to the bone Rain returns home after eight days of windy search, and there he finds Hwempetla, who reveals his hiding place. "You are right," Rain says, I have torn the whole earth asunder, while you were in my own compound. I, Rain, reside with nobody in particular, I am anywhere. If you are thirsty with your small mountain, than simply tell me "I am thirsty" and I shall pour myself at your doorstep. Do not buy rain anywhere, but ask me."[2]

This myth not only lies at the heart of the rain hunt, at least of the Mogode refusal to "buy rain" but also is a tale of initiation, the Kapsiki boys' initiation lasting eight days in seclusion out of reach of both the sun and Rain (VAN BEEK 1978).

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[2] The variant with the ground squirrel has a different ending. The squirrel does get the daughter of Rain as a bride, and gives an elephant as bride wealth. However, he cheats on his father in law, and together with the leopard eats the elephant. At the end Rain catches the leopard red handed in the act of eating, and the squirrel escapes scot free.

So *Va* is a person, someone related to *shala*. In some representations the ram is his symbol, but according to rainmakers Rain is "like a human being", like a white person in fact:

> There are two *Va*, one man, one woman; both are long, have a red complexion and have long blond hair. If someone swears an oath invoking them [not unusual] they check the oath and hit any oathbreaker with the stick they always carry. Those oathbreakers later shall bit hit by lightning, the "knife of Rain". *Va* walks on the surface of the earth, shakes himself as a porcupine whenever rain is needed. His wife only walks with him when they have to kill somebody. In that case they appear in the culprit's compound in the form of a ram, wrapped in a goatskin like a corpse is, or with a "cache-sexe" in the case of a woman. When many people see them and cry out "let him go, let him go" they might renounce their victim, leave their clothes behind and retreat to the heavens where they live.

A rainmaker like Cakereda does not command *Va*, he is simply respected by *Va*. In case of drought, *Va* usually withholds rain for some specific transgression, sometimes lack of attention by the *ndemeva*. The success of the rainmaker thus depends on the repect he can generate from *Va*; the commentary on my initial "success" was revealing: *Va*, being himself more or less a white man, has respected the white man's presence in the ritual, appreciating his attention.

In the rain hunt the notion that the obstacles against rain should be eliminated is even more evident. The wind is stilled in many of the ritual instances, as wind is seen as the rival of the rains: "The wind has to stop before the rains can come". Almost all villages have some caverns, crevaces that have to be filled up, to quell the winds.

When the wind is taken care of in the ritual, one other stumbling block for rain may surface: an ill-willing individual. During a drought, especially during the first dry spell within the rainy season, tales and whispers abound of people who stop the rain (van BEEK 1994). Any rainmaker, according to most Kapsiki, has the power to stop the rains. For our rainmaker of Gouria a simple ritual would suffice:

> On a large flint he smears a mixture of beans and ocre, with a tail feather of a rooster. Then a rainbow appears in the sky, stopping rain. A positive reason to stop rain, might be when too much is falling. The *ndemeva* then mixes ashes from his fireplace, with some melon seeds and grains of finger millet (Pennicetum), which he puts on the place of honor in his compound. To have the rains return he sacrifices the blod of a rooster with some ashes on his rain jar.

According to this rainmaker, he cannot stop the rain for longer than five days; after that, *Va* would overrule him. However, in most cases, other people than the recognized *ndemeva* were accused of stopping rain, or thus claimed for themselves.

After the unsuccessful rain hunt in Mogodé a certain Miyi claimed to have stopped rain, and would continue doing so, unless he was paid by the village community. The village chief was livid, but his ward neighbours gave him three balls of tobacco and a chicken: "He might be right; after all, the rainmaker of Wula (a mighty one!) is his friend." After this gift, Miyi went into the field, and indeed some rain fell. This prompted his ward chief on behalf of his people to lodge an official complaint against Miyi with the district chief ("chef de canton"): if his claim was true, then Miyi transgressed against the village; if he was lying, the same would hold. Though the district chief was extremely sceptic ("lies, all lies; rain is not stopped by one simple person, not if everybody performs his sacrifices") he did follow up on the complaint. When the village chief was sent over to see Miyi to investigate, and maybe to summon him, Miyi had left the village. Though the people from the ward were convinced that their threat had worked to procure some rain, they were chastised by some old men: "We do not buy our rain here in Mogodé. Hwempetla speaks for us. If we do not trust him, we shall die in this village. [In fact, this situation elicited the story of Hwempetla and Rain]. The inhabitants of the ward took a very pragmatic standpoint: "We cannot have the millet die, can we? Trying does no harm; if he lies, we shall know, if his claim is correct, we can give him things. No harm in trying out." A few days later, after a large rain, Miyi came home, and the case was closed: everybody was busy cultivating the fields. Yet, two years later, nobody was very surprised when Miyi was killed by lightning in a neighbouring village. Everybody understood.

Thus, the central notion is of rain as a normal, but vulnerable asset, a boon that comes when nothing impedes. Rainmakers have to merit respect, rituals have to be performed, and individual people should not try to make a quick buck with unsubstantiated claims or blackmail their village with substantiated ones. The rain situation, thus, is one fraught with problems, difficulties, sometimes disasters. Rain can go wrong; if it is not wrong, it is "normal". Rains should come in time, in their expected and needed quantities, and ending in their due season. Anything less than that is not "normal" and a problem. So, in this Kapsiki definition of the rain situation there is no optimalisation, no "doing better than usual", no "bumper year".

Therefore the range of action open for man is limited; avoiding disaccord with the supernatural world (*ndegema*) is the most important one; however, for a large part it is a regressive action, in which wrongs are redressed. The powers that

really command rain, should be left free and unimpeded, reacting as little as possible against human actions in the past. In this vision man is a liability, someone who works and sometimes even plots against his own evident interest. Group interests may clash here with individual gains, as they often do in Kapsiki culture. The individual gain, be it money or recognition (e.g. a rainmaker may stop rain, feeling that he is not respected well enough in the village) is perceived as a threat against the long term common good: rain.

The embodiment of this common good, the connection with rain, is in fact the symbol of power; it is the true, real and direct line to Gudur that counts. The center of power is the center of the rain, as well as the center of harm to the crops (locusts and other insects). The center of well being is the center of threat. The most powerful rainmakers are the ones closest to Gudur: apart from Gudur and Sukur themselves, these are Wula and Tlukwu. The former being a "brother village" of Sukur, very closely related indeed, the latter case is different and revealing.

> Tlukwu is the village of death, the village where during the wet season in a series of interconnected village rituals "death" or rather "the epidemic" (both personalized in Kapsiki cosmology) is sent to. Following the general direction of the rains, the villages in the East start with a ritual in which "bad things" are sent off towards the West, to Tlukwu (VAN BEEK 1977:295). Their western neighbours pick it up, sending epidemics to the next western neighbour. Arriving eventually in Tlukwu, the "bad things" are sent farther west, until it is gone with the wind.

Whence the close association of Tlukwu with death is not clear at all; the association of Gudur and Sukur with power on the other hand are of long standing and bear some fascinating historic dimensions (VAN BEEK 1988, KIRK-GREENE 1958, MOHAMMADOU 1988). In all three cases, power and rain go together, but also in all three the primal power base is not the control of rain, but control over another power source. Power over rain implies power over people. In both instances, Gudur or the negation of Gudur by Hwempetla, a stable rain making power is based on other power bases. In the case of Gudur it is an ancient theocratic realm (SEIGNOBOS 1991, JOUAUX 1991), where political dominance was expressed in many ways, i.a. in the control of crickets and plagues; in the case of Sukur a domination on the basis of iron production (KIRK-GREENE 1956, 1960, SASSOON 1964, VAUGHAN 1964, VAN BEEK 1989). The story of Hwempetla, with its many variants both in Mogodé and elsewhere (VAN BEEK 1978, 1982b) centers on the deliverance of a village from the payment of tribute, in fact on an internal war between Kapsiki villages (VAN BEEK 1987, OTTERBEIN 1968). In all other cases of rain making or rain stopping individual

claims were incidental, contested and short lived. So, the power over rain seems to be a derived one, dependent on or at least covarying with power over people.

Inversely, the connection with rain might serve as an expression for power over men. Speaking about rain, interhuman relations always seem to be close. So, the discourse over rain reads as a discourse on power.

From this point of view, the dealings with rain, both mythical and contemporary, may gain a new dimension. Indeed, the notion of dependency on a more or less capricious supernatural world is evident. But this very dependency, as well as the notion of limitedness of rain and the good it can bring about, may be read as an expression for the dissolution of power, the absense of hegemony. In Kapsiki political organisation two tendencies show: centralisation of an externally based authority, and individual autonomy. Each village has and has had for a long time, their own *maze meleme*, village chief. Throughout colonial and post-colonial history the tendency towards a limited centralisation of poverty is clear. The (post)colonial administration for a long time has burdened but also boosted the chief's position with many tasks and duties, from urging people to be present at official functions to judging disputes and imposing fines. This does tie in with notions of the mythical chiefs of the village, but it especially fits in with the powers attributed to the central places of ritual and secular power in the mountains: Gudur and Sukur, which are beyond the Kapsiki territory. It is from these places that most Kapsiki villages trace their descent, it is there that protection against catastrophic threats (locusts e.g.) may be gained. So administrative centralisation in fact did fit in well with notions of power sources external to the Kapsiki region.

On the other hand, a definite tendency towards internal autarchy runs through Kapsiki society. People value their individual autonomy to a very high degree, resenting any interference with their private lives whatsoever, even from the village chief or any authority. A continous discourse runs throughout all gatherings, be they explicitly political or other, in which officials deplore the headstrong individual, castigating him, branding him as anti-social. Lack of respect for authority, anti-social individualism and the absense of a sense of collective responsibility are common complaints in any group of men. Indeed, for an African society, notions of privacy abound, and non-interference in private matters is normal, also from family. Consequently, control by family, i.e. of brothers, is quite low, and if exerted, resented. Brothers, in Kapsiki society, often are at odds with each other; for one thing, accusations of sorcery more often than not are voiced between brothers.

This denial of the possibility of control is strengthened by some aspects of Kapsiki cosmology (VAN BEEK 1978). For instance, the notion of *shala* (god) is pertinent here, as a refraction into individual relations with individual *shala* is

essential; *shala* is not a single supernatural being: at the same time it is a high god and an individual guiding spirit for each and every individual. So what holds for the village, essentially holds for the individual as well (VAN BEEK 1994). The denial of Gudur's authority by Mogodé implies the denial of authority within the village as well. This is further attested by the role the individual can play versus rain: he is able to stop it, for a short time only, but still. The individual can hamper the course of normal events, but cannot enhance it. In the long run it does not make too much difference, but on short term the objectives of the individual run counter to the collective good.

In the political sphere the notion of chieftainship, of collective responsibility, runs counter to the value of individual self-sufficiency and autarchy. On the one hand any authority is seen as coming from elsewhere, be it Gudur of old, the colonizer in recent history (VAN BEEK 1986) or the present government in Yaoundé; any of those is essentially foreign, but nonetheless legitimate. Power comes from the outside, if it is to be acceptable (cf. DE HEUSCH 1994). Within Kapsiki society few interpersonal differences, almost no intra-village power and surely no hegemony is accepted or even acceptable. People may listen to the village chief with some respect, but will not act according to his wishes. Thus, power differences within the villages are to be denied, while power from beyond the village perimeters, inevitable and accepted as such, has to be avoided.

These two conflicting tendencies, the problem of control over the force coming from abroad and the denial of any claims from within can be seen in the notions of power over rain. First, in the myth Hwempetla offers a denial of the legitimacy of buying rain, i.e. of the power that emanates from Gudur, and the power of any individual rainmaker. Even he, who outwitted Rain (and almost outwitted Death in a similar story) was unable to do anything more than procure an equal distribution of the scarce commodity of water, benefiting his own village but not more than other villages. In this myth, the common good cannot be actively sought, after all, it just has to distributed at random. Every village is equal and equally dependent.

One other aspect of the myth should be mentioned: Hwempetla is the culture hero that delivers his village Mogodé from the oppressing bonds with neighbouring Gouria. In order to break the obligation of rendering tribute for an original gift of fire, Hwempetla ventures war with Gouria, and - with the help of immigrating strangers - wins. And this very same Gouria houses one of the renowned rainmakers of the region, descended straight from Gudur. So Hwempetla's exploits with rain parallel his liberation of Mogodé from the (partial) overlordship of Gouria, and with that also of Gudur, Gouria's source of power. The rain hunt is more than a ritual for rain: it is also an expression of the

self-sufficiency, also in ritual matters, of the village[3]: no longer dependent on outside power of Gudur, it has replaced the old recognition of Gudur power with its own denial of the possibility for rain making by humans.

Speaking about rain thus is an idiom about power relations within and between villages, a discourse about the centres of power beyond the mountains, whose influence is thwarted by the autarchy of the village first, and by individualistic attitudes inside the village secondly. Control over rain is a thing to be desired, an idiom also of ancient power, but at the same time something to be challenged and broken down. Power over rain, just like power of people, may be legitimate when coming from abroad, but in the end will not hold out against the interests of the individual; at best, any kind of power has continually to prove itself, in order to hold unto some legitimation at all.

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[3] It is an open question what the place of the former rainmaker in Mogodé might have been, whose abandoned house was visited during the hunt. According to some informants he was a recent immigrant from Gudur, who never really became part of the village society; as such, the visit to his old house is just an addition to a ritual that has a cumulative character anyway.

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