

WATER AND THE MAFA

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Abstract

The Mafa are, with more than a 100,000 individuals, the largest ethnic group in the Mandara mountains. They live mainly along the northern inner slopes, where they cultivate their terraced fields, mainly with guinea corn. Water is an essential good for the Mafa. This is reflected in their conception of the world, the spirit world as well as in the world of traditional political power. Water has a very strong spiritual dimension which reflects its crucial economic importance. The water spirits are perceived as a source of fertility and wealth, but also of danger, magic, and psychological pitfalls. Water, like rain is considered rather as a cultural than a natural good, personified by the political importance of the rain priest. Also the spiritual quality of water is very significant, God remaining always the central point of all ritual actions dealing with water issues.

Keywords: Mythology, water spirit, Mafa, Mandara mountains.

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Water and the conception of the world

The conception of the world of the Mafa is geocentric². Heaven and the next world are mirrored by this life. To explain this, Fudahugwan from Guzda used the analogy of a clay bowl filled with water, wherein a person could see someone doing the same movements as himself. If somebody dies, according to Fudahugwan, the body decomposes, but the silhouette (*mzhèbè*) survives. Fudahugwan believes that water came on earth together with man, and if there was no rain priest there would be no rain. Before man, he is convinced, there was no rain, only wilderness.

Briefly, the world consists of life on earth (*wuda*), with two pillars (*sak zhiglè*) which support the sky like a hangar (*balak zhiglè*). On top of the sky is heaven, where god's children (*zhiglè wudaha*) live and where the sorcerers (*mide*) go to imprison captured souls (*mzhèbè*). At the very highest point of heaven lives god with his wife, where they rule the world. Underneath the earth is the next world (*veved*), where the ancestors (*vuzi sak*) live. Underneath the world of the ancestors is water. This is where the pillars of the world are rooted and where the great water spirit (*nihèd*) lives. Underneath the water of the world is earth again, otherwise the water would run away.

At the beginning, man could eat stones which were soft, but after an old woman urinated over the stones, they became hard, and sorghum came to earth, stolen by the first settler from god's wife, while she was feeding the chickens, which are the stars. The urine of the old woman turned into the rainbow, which comes under the control of the rain priest. He is the only one who can find rainstones (*kwa korai*), which are necessary for rain making. Rainstones have been obtainable ever since the old woman urinated over the stones which were man's first food. The urine of the old woman transformed first into water spirits, and after that into rainstones. The rainbow itself consists of rainstones and if people see the rainbow, they say: "The urine of the old woman is in the sky, there won't be any rain today." Now it is up to the rain priest to get rid of the rainbow so that the rain is free to fall again.

These accounts of the place of water in the conception of the world among the Mafa are very simplified. In reality, the myths are much more complex, e.g. the theft of the sorghum corn from heaven. Other myths, illustrating some of the most common topics in Africa, are not mentioned, like the origin of the fire from heaven, taken by a dog's tail, or the transformation of the sun into a ram after

² The source material of this article is taken from field notes I collected between 1985 and 1990. At this point, I want to thank Paul Jikdayè, who was my Mafa interpreter, for his invaluable assistance.

sunset, or the old woman, who keeps the pillars of the world free from termites. While the old woman who urinated over the stones is evil, symbolising dryness and infertility, the old woman who keeps the pillars of world clean is caring and looks after the world by ensuring its safety. I have not repeated all these myths in detail and have omitted others, and neither have I taken into consideration here all the different versions and discussions the Mafa have among themselves.

Due to the oral nature of this mythology, somebody might say that there is no water underneath the next world, or that the urine of the old woman does not transform into water spirits before becoming rainstones. Another person could say that the pillars of the world are made out of iron. Asked whether the old woman is still working there, the person might answer that the first pillars were made from wood, but because the old woman was working so hard the first blacksmith made her pillars of iron.

Let us return to Fudahugwan's clay bowl filled with water in which someone can see his double. This analogy highlights very much the way the Mafa think, and how their conception of the world is constructed. Explanations are taken from the experiences of everyday life. In this context they are totally logical and empirical. The invisible and inexplicable, that which we can't see, is explained by the analogy of a mirror, symbolised by the reflecting surface of quiet water. Life in the other worlds is seen as a reflection of life in this world. Another point of interest Fudahugwan makes is that rain is a product of culture. This assumption is very unusual for us, but for Fudahugwan there is no way to see rain simply as a natural event, detached from man. Rain is one of the most important cultural goods and without rain there would be no culture at all.

Water and the spirit world

Mafa distinguish between four main spirits: water spirits, spirits of local shrines, spirits of the rocks, and house spirits. The water spirits are considered to be the most powerful of these spirits. Water means fertility and wealth, but also danger and magical power. If the villagers start a new water point, they normally appoint a person who is responsible for making regular sacrifices at this particular place.

Only sorcerers and clairvoyants are able to see water spirits. According to them, water spirits are white and have long hair. They are able to live permanently under water, although their dwellings are not necessarily seen as water filled and therefore could be inhabited by humans as well. They live in rivers and little creeks, lakes, swamps, wells and other humid places. If they leave such a place, the place then dries out, and another place, which was previously dry suddenly starts to become wet.

Water spirits are mainly seen as good, though some of them can be evil. Somebody with cattle who lives on a riverside can be rich or poor, depending on the will of the water spirit. Sorcerers can't live at the riverside. Due to their burning light of life, they are imagined to be the biggest enemies of the water spirits. Water spirits kill sorcerers who try to approach them. Nevertheless, very powerful sorcerers have been able to reach the water underneath the next world, down there where the big water spirit lives. They didn't get killed, and were able to turn themselves into white people.

Someone can be kidnapped by a water spirit. It is most often the soul which gets kidnapped and the body is found left behind, lifeless, at the riverbank. To get somebody back, sacrifices are necessary, and if the water spirit accepts, which is normally the case, the person wakes up or reappears after a while. In a case where the water spirit doesn't give the lost person back, a second or a third sacrifice is necessary. The person responsible for the sacrifice of the riverside takes sodium bicarbonate and tobacco, a water bracelet (*darai yam*) and ground sorghum. He celebrates the sacrifices and knocks with the water bracelet on the water shrine (*di-mblom yam*), very often a long stone lying in the river, to encourage the water spirit to give the lost person back. If the water spirit is evil and people or cattle disappear too often, a heated flint is thrown into the water and after a while the place dries out, which indicates that the evil water spirit has left the area.

The different water spirits do communicate with each other. One of the most important water spirits lives in the lake at the mount Ziver. The mount Ziver is part of the highest and most massive elevation in the Mandara mountains, and on top of it's 1200 meter high plateau is a big swampy area with a small but very deep pool where the water of the swamp comes to appear on the surface. This is the *gangub Ziver*, where we find one of the most important water shrines of the area. The water spirit of the lake Ziver is said to communicate with the water spirit of the *futai Guzda*, the main river at the valley bottom of the eastern side of this mountain range, leading into the river Ngeshewe in the plain of Koza. The lake Ziver water spirit can ask the river Guzda water spirit to give him a person or vice-versa. The villagers say that water spirits exchange people.

Water spirits are a source for wisdom and divination. The prawn is thought to have been taught by the water spirits how to identify the hidden truth of conspiracy and sorcery. Next to divination with stones, divination with prawns is very common among the Mafa. To divine, the prawn moves a symbolic set up of small plant sticks, decorated calabash pieces, and small balls made out of clay in a big clay bowl filled with water and sand, which then gets interpreted by the diviner, who has previously arranged the set up in a meaningful grouping in accordance with his client's social and spiritual environment.

Budam, a diviner from Guzda, reports that the prawn wasn't always domesticated and that in the first place no diviner was necessary. Instead of a clay bowl, she lived at the riverside, and spoke to everybody who came to ask her advice, always telling the truth in public. The sorcerers didn't like to be identified in the open, and one of them went to throw a stone at her. After that, the prawn asked to be taken home by one of her next clients to whom she taught the way to divine as it is still being done today. On her own, the prawn wouldn't be able to do this, but due to her spiritual connection with the water spirits, she is able to help man to sort out his hidden conflicts and so to contribute to his physical and mental well being.

Not only do the blessings of the prawn come originally from the water spirits, but also those of the bull, the most powerful symbol of territoriality, wealth and political unity of the village. Sacrificed in the bull festival (*marai*), this creature was, however, once the bull of the water spirit. Faisam, the chief of Mckar, explains that one of his ancestors found four very big bulls at the riverbank. He knew that they belonged to the water spirit, and he took some soil to put it on the back of one of the bulls to prevent him from being taken back by the water spirit. He took the bull back home and kept him in a stable. This bull mounted the cow and a new bull was born. The old one was taken out of the stable for the first bull festival and shown to everybody in all its magnificent splendour. After that, the bull got sacrificed and shared with his kin. In Faisam's story we can see the blessings and wealth coming from the water, symbolised by the water spirit. It is a very common theme, not only among the Mafa, that a man follows his cattle and finally settles there in the place where his cattle want to remain because of the water available. On the other hand, the water spirits are able to make cattle disappear by kidnapping them. Therefore, to protect themselves, the owners of cattle put soil on the backs of their cattle when they bring them to the river for the first time after the harvest. The animals are kept inside until the reaping of the sorghum is over.

The spiritual connection between twins and water is another facet of the spirit world of the Mafa. Twins are seen as magically very powerful beings and many rituals around their birth and life have to do with water and the belief in the special spiritual power of water. Some Mafa believe that in a case where a woman gives birth to twins for the second time, the water spirit must have had contact with her before she got pregnant. A special ceremony at the compound, as well as at the riverbank, has to take place, otherwise the water spirit could take the twins away. But thanks to the ceremony, the twins get the protection of the water spirit. Other Mafa think that all twins are initially caused by water spirits, and that all twins have spirits very similar to that of the water spirits. Not

only the birth, but also the death of twins is caused by the water spirit who is believed to have taken the twins back.

The life of twins is accompanied by an annual ritual (*halalai*), in which a vine growing in swampy patches at the riverbank plays an important part. The vine is taken along with a palm leaf and these are both placed in front of the compound. This has a protective function. During the ritual meal which takes place in the darkness of the store house (*huzhèm*), no light is allowed and water gets splashed over sorghum leaves and in the faces of the participants. The day of the annual twin ritual should be a rather cloudy, overcast day, with not very much wind, and with some rain to follow after the ceremony.

Twins, as well as water spirits, are a sign of fertility and wealth, but they are very dangerous as well. The energy of twins can also injure their relatives or even blind their parents. They are thought to be nervous, unpredictable and easy to upset. They can be interpreted as the physical appearance of the psychic double, the silhouette described above by Fudahugwan, as seen in the clay bowl filled with water, where one can see somebody mirroring himself. In the past, one twin has very often been killed by its parents to correct this abnormal physical event.

Also, the blacksmith (*ngwozla*) is involved in the twin ritual. If a woman gives birth to twins, the blacksmith, who deals as a magico-technician with nearly all spiritually dangerous situations in the communal and personal life of the Mafa, accompanies the mother back into the compound after the birth. Then he goes home and he produces the twin bracelet (*darai halalai*), which is very similar to the bracelet of the water spirit, while his wife produces the twin pot (*halalai*). When the mother is crossing the river the first time after the twins are born, the blacksmith goes with her, and while she scoops up water to give to the twins, he plays his guitar (*gandzavar*).

The month in which the twins annual ritual takes place is the month, *malama*. This is the month when the blacksmiths do their annual lineage sacrifice and get married. They are excluded as an endogamous group from the corporate group sacrifices performed by the majority of the Mafa (*vavai*), who do not marry in this particular month and only have the ceremony of the twins. In this aspect, we can already see the political context appearing, shaped by the segmentarian lineage organisation of the Mafa society. Water spirits do not incorporate territorial symbolism. The soil put on the back of the bull, who originally came from the water spirit, is a symbol of the surface of the earth, a sphere dominated by man, given by god and the ancestors; the world of measurement and action rather than intuition and speculation.

Water and political power

As already mentioned, the Mafa have a segmentarian political structure. This means that each segment is politically more or less independent, and that there is no centralised political power, although the Mafa do have a chief called *bi-mafa*, which means chief of the Mafa. His political power has almost gone, but in the past, especially in pre-colonial times, he was very much feared, because of the possession of the *kule*, a magical remedy, which allowed him to control all major plagues and epidemics, like crickets and caterpillars or leprosy, diarrhoea and colds. The Mafa chief lives in the quarter *Vrdèkè* in Moskota. *Vrdèkè* is also the name of the clan he belongs to, and because of that, he is also called the *bi-vrdèkè*. Other important Mafa chiefs are the rain priests (*bi-yam*), and one of the most important rain priests is the *bi-mudukwa*. Mudukwa is the name of a village north of the mount Ziver. The *bi-mudukwa's* power covers the whole north-western area of the Mafa region. Both chiefs derive their political power from magical control over natural events, as we would call them, although the Mafa rather see their chiefs as the personifications of these events and therefore as cultural rather than natural. From this ideological angle they enter the sphere of political power attributed to them, and they are able to decide whether there should be a cricket plague or a drought or not.

Neither of the chiefs belong to a Mafa clan. The Mafa chief traces himself back to Gudur. By oral tradition Gudur is the historical centre of a traditional regional power, located in the south-east of the northern Mandara mountains, and spreading all over the mountains and the adjacent plains. The rain chief of Mudukwa is from Muktele origin, an eastern ethnic group, next to the Mafa. In the context of the foreign ethnic origin, we see a pattern we have already seen before regarding the magico-technical role of the smith caste. Although the blacksmiths, due to their endogamy, are excluded from political power while the Mafa chief and the rain priest hold political power, it seems to me, that for handling dangerous magical issues, the Mafa prefer to leave this power to others than themselves. However, here again, we see the spiritual water connection as essential, not only concerning the rain priest, but also regarding the preparation of the *kule*, the magical power of the *bi-mafa*.

Kule is normally an illness which makes the stomach swell. The *kule* grows for three years in the stomach. After three years the *kule* starts to get hairy like an animal. If the sick person fails to identify the illness before the *kule* gets hairy and to organise a sacrifice conducted by somebody who belongs to the clan of the *bi-mafa*, he dies. *Kule*, however, is also a very powerful remedy, and the Mafa chief himself is in possession of the most powerful *kule*. In the past, he went once a year on a journey to Gudur to prepare the *kule* at the sacred lake of Gudur. His

journey took him through different parts of the Mafa territory where sick people, especially those with leprosy, joined him en route to benefit from the *kule* preparations. As already mentioned, the lake of Gudur was the goal of the journey. A fire was lit on the surface of the lake to prepare the *kule*. After the remedy was ready, the sick had their bodies rubbed with it, already recovering after several days. The rest of the *kule* was taken home. Another *kule* was prepared on top of the lake. For this a cattle without horns was used which had been given by the chief of Gudur (*bi-gudur*). All cattle, goats and sheep who were used had to be hornless, as well as black. In the past, the lake of Gudur was considered a sacred place, into which nobody was allowed to go. Somebody who entered the lake, in spite of this rule, took the risk that his legs would fall off. For the ceremony of the preparation of the *kule*, only certain people are allowed to enter the lake, these people being able to walk on the surface of the water. Also those people who sat around the fire on top of the lake, sat there as if it were solid ground. During the *kule* ceremony everybody who suffered from leprosy could bathe in the lake which also had a healing effect. On his way home, the Mafa chief could use his *kule* power to heal the sick. He also put some of it on the ground to prevent illness in the future. Every village had a special place in which to prepare their own *kule*, but the *kule* of the Mafa chief was the most powerful. Still today, next to his compound, there is a special house, the magic house of the *kule*, where he keeps all illnesses and plagues locked away, with the power of his *kule*.

The importance of the sacred lake of Gudur is not only shown in the preparation of the *kule*. When the Mafa chief dies, mud taken out of the lake of Gudur is mixed with animal fat to fill the open spaces of his body, his mouth, his nose, his eyes, his ears, his anus and even underneath his fingernails and toenails. Unfortunately, I have no information about the possible existence of a belief in a water spirit which lives in this water pool, imagined as the spiritual origin of the chief's enormous magical power.

That the Mafa chief was more powerful than the rain priest of Mudukwa seems unquestionable. This also becomes obvious when we compare their funerals. The Mafa chief was the only one to be carried in a standing position from his house to his grave. But both the Mafa chief and the rain priest were very wealthy. The political power of the Mafa chief is diminishing faster than that of the rain priest. This might have to do with the nature of their power. While the rain priest is dealing with the amount of rainfall, which is an ongoing problem in the economic life of the Mafa, epidemics and plagues are no longer as threatening as they were in the past because of the use of pesticides and modern medical treatments. So most traditional Mafa in our area see the rain priest as the key person who opens the annual cycle of the beginning of the harvest and as the

person who announces the new year festival (*ngolala*). But in reality it is the task of the Mafa chief to give the initial sign to start the harvest. He is also the person who has to give signal before the rain priest can announce the new year festival. He does that by throwing a stick of the plant *wuzad* (a plant which is plaited to make screens) in the direction of Mudukwa, where the stick has to be found by the rain priest in his old grindstone (*tarok*) in front of his compound. The rain priest, for his part, has to pick the stick up and throw it in the direction of Gudur. Only after that can the rain priest announce: "*wa pda dau zom ngolala a yam.*" This means that everybody should put the sorghum for the new year festival in the water for germination, to produce the sorghum beer to celebrate the cults.

Nevertheless, the rain priest is not regarded as an official of the Mafa chief. The rain priest and the Mafa chief are rather seen as friends who exchange gifts and support each other. The Mafa explain this by saying that when the *bi-mafa* goes to Mudukwa to visit the rain priest he gets a ram as a gift, and when the rain priest visits him in Moskota the *bi-mafa* gives him a ram as well. If the rain doesn't fall, the Mafa chief can invite the rain priest to come to visit him and he can ask him for the reason why. It can also come about that the *bi-mafa* himself goes to see the rain priest who might recommend him to sacrifice a black goat or a black cockrel when he returns home. The colour of the sacrificed animal for the *kule* preparation at the lake of Gudur was also black which seems to be another indication of the water spirit connection to the origin of the magical political power of the Mafa chief. Black is a common colour used for rain sacrifices in Africa, symbolising the darkening of the sky, heavy with rain clouds.

Although it is essential to look at the spirit world, if we want to understand the political and religious culture of the Mafa, god remains the central point in the Mafa philosophy. I was invited to a little rain ceremony held in a friend's house. The rain priest was visiting Guzda and was performing the ceremony. The following prayer, spoken by the rain priest, shows this clearly: "...I gather here with my best friends who I do not wish to disappoint. If I'm the person who is chosen to be the rain priest, then god, let it rain now. You entrusted me with this work; it is necessary that it rains..." In this short prayer, there is no reference to a water spirit or any other spirit. The only reference is to god, perceived as the creator of everything; god who lives with his wife at the highest point in heaven, and who entrusted the rain priest with this responsibility. Fortunately, shortly after this little rain ceremony, the blue sky became covered with black clouds and soon after that it started to rain heavily.