THE BLACKSMITH AND THE RAINMAKER AMONG THE VERRE

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The Verre, numbering about 50000, live in the country south of Yola, the capital of Gongola State, in north-eastern Nigeria. The terrain varies considerably. Some Verre communities inhabit the flattish country south of Yola Town, others still live in the hill country, others in the country of low hills and stream valleys around Yadim, the market centre where I lived. In the 19th century they experienced extensive raiding from the Fulani. In the colonial period they were placed under the Fulani Emir of Adamawa, and, at the present time, the chief of Karlahi, who is the senior Verre chief, is nominated by the Adamawa Emirate Council (other chiefs being simply ward chiefs). Fulfulde became *lingua franca* of the area, though now Hausa is tending to replace it. Verre over forty generally adhere to traditional beliefs, though many have Muslim and some Christian names. The world religions have been more successful among the younger generation, and, in the area where I worked, Verre Christians outnumbered Muslims.

Verre live in compounds, usually fenced by matting, containing a household, or households, which may constitute a grand-family. Related

compounds may cluster close together, and environmental factors may lead to a number of coumpounds being sufficiently close together to have the appearance of a village, even though the Verre are not really a village society in the sense in which the Igbo or Yako are. Local groups are for some purposes (tax-payments and the work of the Christian churches) seen as more important than kin groups, so English-speaking Verre speak of their "villages" or "towns".

Verre kinship has to be understood as the result of Verre marriage. There were two kinds of marriage, the first marriage, which permitted the establishment of a household composed of husband and wife, whose children would belong to the wife's group, and the second marriage by which rights over the children were transferred to the husband's group.

The basic kin group is the *woom*, a three to four generation group, which is perceived as primarily patrilineal, even though because of marriage rules some of the nembers may be linked to it through their mothers. Above the *woom* is the *gbaare*, which English-speaking people will call "clan". This is not a very large unit. One excellent informant estimated his *gbaare* as having some twenty adult males. While members of the *gbaare* regard each other as kin, genealogical ties are not traceable usually beyond the *woom*, and the *gbaare* is not a land-holding unit. It has a head, the *banagbaare*, who is an elder primarily concerned with ritual matters.

The other clan functionaries are the *toz*, the priest responsible for the main agricultural rituals,

and the *banaleuze*, the "director of the boys" circumcision rite. In the principle, the *banagbaare* and the *toz* should be different people, but in practise they may be the same. A woman can be a *toz* or a *banaleuze*, and can be an assistant to a *banagbaare*.

The only all-Verre office-holder as distinct from those imposed by the emirate and the colonial, or post-colonial, state is the *saa'az* (rainmaker). There is one chief rainmaker for all Verre country, who lives at Ragin, well in to the right (coming from Yola) of the Yola-Fufore road. There are also lesser rainmakers at Bai and Boi, who seem to acknowledge the greater authority of the Ragin rainmaker.

As this paper is concerned with the mythical contraposition of the rainmaker and the blacksmith, I had better say something about Verre blacksmiths. Art historians have noted the fine quality of Verre smithing, and there are a number of items of Verre bronze work in Nigerian museums. There is evidence that Verre metalwork was traded outside Verre country in the late nineteenth century. At the present time, blacksmiths are scattered among agriculturalists in Verre country (up to the sixties, there was a blacksmith community at Mayo Seni in the southern end of Verre country) and produce work for farming and domestic use, such as axes, hoes, needles for sewing sacks, rings and also swords for display, bought by both Verre and Fulani.

I heard the myth of the conflict between the blacksmith and the remainder in more than one

version. Here is the version given me by Martin Isa, blacksmith at Womkura, Womkasa.

"Blacksmiths were rivals with the rainmaker. The blacksmith went to the rainmaker's work, then he (rainmaker) met him, said that he (rainmaker) is greater than him (blacksmith).

The blacksmith said that it is he (blacksmith) who is greater than him (rainmaker). That is why they became rivals. Rainmaker stopped making rain for one year. Then both the rainmaker and the blacksmith were hungry, then the next year the blacksmith brought fire. The rainmaker rain put out the fire. Then the blacksmith left smithing things, then they were hungry that year again, two years. Then they came together, they said now they knew they were equal. That is why, if the blacksmith brings fire, the rain does not quench it, until he finishes his work.

The rainmaker comes to the forge, then meets the blacksmith forging hoes. Then he chooses a hoe, gives it to the rainmaker, says let him farm. Then they hold hands, that is how they are equal".

How do we "crak" this myth? Is it a political myth about the balance of power in Verre society, is it a cosmic myth about fire and water as opposing principles, is it a myth which justifies a ritual, or is it simply a "just-So Story" about discovering equality through a quarrel ?

None of these interpretations seem very satisfactory. The *saa'az* is a pan-Verre figure and there is no single pan-Verre blacksmith figure, nor do the blacksmiths seem to have had political functions, nor are they surrounded by much ritual.

The blacksmiths' feast in May or thereabouts is essentially an occasion of sociability, and Martin Isa, speaking in Verre, used the English word "party" in speaking of it. The only ritual elements which specifically mark the blacksmith identity are a taboo against anybody except a blacksmith eating food which has been cooked in the smithy, the burial of blacksmiths separately from other people, and the *tuuksei*. The *tuuksei* is an apparition which looks like a pig. Anybody who looks at it die by snakebite. It is intented to keep people from looking at blacksmiths when they are doing their own work. I am not myself quite sure what this means, since blacksmiths nowadays work quite openly. It might be a reference to the belief in magic needles forged by sorcerers. In any case, the *tuuksei* seems to be similar to the animal transformations which can be undertaken by wizards or witches, and does not seem to indicate some extraordinary mystical power available only to blacksmiths.

The myth has, certainly, a cosmic dimension. I remember, one evening, sitting in a compound while lightening was playing beside clouds, and being told that the story of the blacksmith and the rainmaker (of which the appearance of the sky had reminded my hosts) showed that water was more important than fire. There are other cosmic myths among the Verre. For instance, I have been told that there are two suns, which take it in turn to rise, shine, and set. When a sun sets, it turns into a goat and runs across country to the point where it will rise again. On one occasion, a man caught a sun-goat and shut it up with his own

goats. Confusion followed, since the sun did not rise when expected. However, not everybody believed this story, and it did not seem particularly important to the Verre. The story of the blacksmith and the rainmaker seems to "open up" Verre culture and society in the way that stories about sun-goats do not. Some of the Verre folktales (*seuseui*) claim to give explanations of customs, e.g. "and that is why it is not good to live alone", but the story of blacksmith and rainmaker seems to be given more weight.

The following extract from a text (Samuel Cholli, 23 April 1987) gives beliefs about rainmakers. "The rainmaker is the person they say brings rain in the rainy season. The person they say he is the *saa'az*, he has all the customs in his hand, from the customs of the *tori* and the *banaleuze*, from water pool (*duur maam*) smallpox, measles, all punishments, they are all in rainmaker's hand and different diseases and different food. Rainmaker, each rainy season, they collect money for him, they bring him a black goat and a man, that is, they put the black goat in the customary place, then rain comes in the rainy season, but if they do not give him anything, rain does not fall. Other people, they beg him that they may grow a great deal of corn. Then, when they have harvested the corn, they bring him a man from their relatives. Then he agrees; if (this is) not (done), that man who received (the harvest), he will die himself.

If the rainmaker is bringing rain, he enters into his inner room without a door. Then he lies down, he covers his head with a decorated

calabash. Then something comes out in his room like mist, then it turns into water, it would spread anywhere in the world if he did not take his calabash off. The rain does not stop unless he removes the calabash, then he prays to his god (*maa'azeu ulleus*), says "Let the people get corn". The people, they get as he has said, one year they get millet one year they get guinea corn. Then he says to the people of every village with a *toz* in it, every year if they want something, let him tell the *tori*, then they send him (a gift), if they do not send, rain will not fall."

This text presents the rainmaker as a controller of the forces of nature, and also as a figure who brings together the various strands of Verre belief and ritual. He has power over the rains and the winds, he can cause diseases, indeed there is a certain correlation between illness and a good harvest. At the same time, he has links with the various *tori* and the circumcision officials, and the sacred pools. His powers are analogous to those of wizards, even though the taking of human lives enables him to provide more abundant harvests, rather than, as with ordinary wizards an witches, simply to steal the prosperity fron other people's farms in order to have a bigger farm oneself.

While it would be possible to sketch out Verre culture and society with the rainmaker as the central figure, it should be said that in practice the *saa'az* does not seem to have concerned himself even in the past with all aspects of Verre life, e.g. he does not seem to have been concerned with warfare or the settlement of disputes, and at the

present time, while a relationship between circumcision and "wetness" is recognised the *saa'az* does not seem to exercise any particular authority over circumcision ceremonies.

From where does the rainmaker get his power? The present (at time of fieldwork) *saa'az* is the fourth rainmaker to hold office, the first one having come from Karin in Bata country. Still today, the songs which accompany dances at sacrifices for rain are sung in Bata, because "the gods will not hear Verre language". If we ask about the mystical, rather than the historical, origin of the rainmaker's power, different answers may be given. Some Christians fit rainmaking into their own cosmology by saying that the rainmaker prays to God, but I have heard one Christian say the *saa'az* has power by witchcraft, a not unreasonable statement given the beliefs about the taking of human life.

The text (from Samuel Cholli) which has been quoted speaks of the *saa'az* "praying to his god", the word *maa'az* being used for "god". Christian informants tend to distinguish between the singular *maa'az* which they consider to be like Ulla (sun), a word applicable to the Biblical God, and the *mai*, a plural form which refers to spirits living in the mountains. It was argued that the two words are similar, but do not refer to beings of the same class. However, from what I have been told of the agricultural rites, and the ceremonial use of the *gadali* category of plants, it would seem that the singular *maa'az* can refer to particular individuals of the *mai* group (like "gods" and "God" in English), and that the *saa'az* was traditionally

seen as an intercessor with a specific spirit of this category.

The rainmaker, then, is a person who performs specific acts with regard to a particular spirit. But also, to a certain extent, and this is certainly the case with the rainmaker's image in this myth, he represents values of "wetness" for the Verre, and it is useful to note some of these values here.

Informants agree that the circumcision ceremony should be held after the beginning of the rainy season, but give varying reasons for this. The reasons I noted were : if it is held in the hot season just before the rains, the boys will suffer. New leaves will be needed to act as bandages. It will be easier to brew beer when rain has fallen. Circumcision should not be held before the *yal* plant has come up (the *yal* plant is included with the *gadali* group of plants). When I asked why the newly circumcised boys, who have to stay in bush after the rite of circumcision, wear leaves, I was told, "They wear leaves because their bodies are hot, they are feeling pain". Some, at least, of the indigenous medical treatments seem to be based on the idea that leaves which have been soaked in water will have a cooling effect - I have seen this treatment applied to snakebite victims. There does not seem, however, to be a general theory of illness caused by heat and needing to be treated by cool or wet substances.

The *duur maam* (pool of water, plural *duuti maam*) has already been mentioned. It is a pool of water (though even a dried-up pool may be counted as a *duur maam*), as distinct from a

running stream) which may belong to a *gbaare* ("clan"), or to an individual, in which case it may be inherited by a son or sister's son. *Duuti maam* may have distinctive characteristics, one may be supposed to give riches, one may be associated with wizards, one may have water that will never boil, to one boys preparing for circumcision will be taken and washed. Each (*duur maam*) is supposed to have a *deungs* (water-spirit, plural *deungi*), that comes out in the form of a snake or an old man. Two services that the *duur maam* is believed to give are its use in war time and its value for divination. One of my notes reads, "Owner of *duur maam* before war will go to *duur maam* by night. When ready to go to war, he will sprinkle it from the pool on the people, so they get strong for war. If they (are) injured, if not so seriously, when they take man back to *duur maam*, he will not die - will recover in two days." With regard to divination, the "owner" (either an individual owner or the *banagbaare* [clan head]) will go by night to talk to the *duur maam*, and the *deungs* may appear to him. In some circumstances, the *deungs* may demand a human life, which makes him analogous to a wizard.

If rain does not fall, does it necessarily mean that the *saa'az* is at fault ? In 1987, the rains came later than usual, and this was ascribed to the *saa'az* being angry that, while people had paid the government development levy, they had paid nothing to him. But this kind of explanation for drought is not the only one. Certain women are believed to have the power to check rainfall because of the rainbows in their stomachs. These

women may be ordinary women, or women holding ritual offices, such as *tooz*, or assistant to the *banagbaare*. A text states : "As to the people who stop rain from coming, these people are witches with rainbows in their stomachs. These rainbows, they are like many snakes in their stomachs, preventing them from sitting comfortably. Any person who has rainbows in her stomach is unhappy, because these rainbows are formed in the place for giving birth to a child. Thus, in the dry season, these rainbows do not go out, because there is no place for washing them. Then, if rain falls, they are happy because the sky is darkening. Then, when the rain begins to fall on the mountain, they go there, they go to wash them in the rain which is falling. They pour them out, going straight down, (it is) not good to see, only wizards and witches then see it, if you are not a wizard or witch you do not see them."

"When they have brought them out, they wash them, some red, some blue. Then the dirt which they wash, it goes up like smoke going straight up, where that rain is falling. If they get clouds, they take that cloud water, they scatter that rain, because the smoke from their dirt is overcoming it, it overcomes the rain. If they wash them thus, they can sit down comfortably, if they do not wash them, they will make a noise in their stomachs, it will prevent them from sleeping."

Another informant stated, "rainbow drinks all the water if clouds are not thick, this (is) witchcraft. No all women have rainbows in their stomachs. Any woman with that rainbow will not give birth. If she conceives, both woman and child

will die. They inherit it from (their) mother. If she has three children, all (three) children can have rainbows."

While only women can have rainbows, men can also block rain. I was also told that, when there is a drought, people may put the blame on a male elder, whose motive may be, as my informant put it, "wickedness only".

It should be noted also that there is a connection between women and lightening. I have been told that, a number of years ago, the people of Lainde went to a funeral at another place, taking a dance, but were driven away. Coming home, the Lainde people met a woman who asked them : "What is this ?" They told her what had happened. Then they saw : "clouds like dancing", then lightening came, and some of the people at the place where the dance had been rejected were killed by it. But again it does not seem that lightening can only be controlled by women.

Verre say that they prefer the wet season to the dry season, which is certainly understandable, given the water shortages that affect many Verre compounds late in the dry season. The first of the cycle of agricultural rites, that performed by the *tooz* at the *kangla* stone, takes place during the rainy season, but the other two, which are "first fruits" rites, take place around late November and early January, both well in the dry season. Circumcision always takes place after the beginning of the rains, and marriage should be in the wet season. Rites connected with social status, including the honouring of a women by her

brother, real or ceremonial, can be held in the wet season, but the dry season seems preferred.

Very sharp dichotomies between "inside" and "outside", or "male" and "female" seem alien to the Verre way of seeing the world. The contraposition of rainmaker and blacksmith is to some extent a contrast of nature and culture, but even so, it does not bisect the whole of Verre culture and society. Thus women are seen as capable of blocking rain with rainbows, and therefore would seem to be on the blacksmith's side of things, the more so as lightening is associated with women, and is seen as a sign of blacksmithing, while male circumcision is associated with the rainy season, but I do not think that Verre people would explicitly identify women with heat and men with coolness.

I have suggested that the blacksmith is for the Verre, a representative of culture against nature. If wetness is associated with fertility, with healing through the countering of undesirable heat, and with the rather mysterious blessings that may come from a *duur maam*, the blacksmith seems to relate to values of human skill and utility. I quote from notes made during a conversation with an educated man who had grown up at Yadim, "blacksmiths are an industrious sect (*sic*), make household utilities, inventions, and fabrications, - they are better than *saa'az*, true, because *saa'az* cannot give any credence to their performance - (blacksmiths) serve community, people learn from them, - *saa'az* doesn't teach people, (blacksmiths) are teachers, they have only power by God's power". This was not the only time I

heard this view expressed. A devout Christian, who believed that the *saa'az*'s power came from God, and who had told me a version of the blacksmith-rainmaker myth, then said that the blacksmith had a far greater range of skills than the *saa'az*.

It may be noted also that the "image" of the blacksmith is much less mysterious than that of the *saa'az*. I quote a text provided by James Deka, "if a blacksmith roasts something, if they cook it in the smithy, (another) man does not eat because it is secret, but if they are gathering food which they cook with many people, it is not secret. If a blacksmith dies, his own people bury him, because it is not secret, everything they do to people who die among the Verre, they do also to him... The blacksmiths do not bury the chiefs, the chiefs, also, they do not bury the blacksmith... Blacksmiths, our people are afraid of them, because they say that if a blacksmith gives you a hoe for farming, then you abuse him afterwards, it is not good. That is why we Verre, we respect the blacksmiths, we give them esteem. The blacksmiths do not know medicines, if they are ill, they will look for a "native doctor", then he treats them, they become well. The blacksmiths are performing the same customs as all the Verre."

It should be noted that it was never suggested to me that blacksmiths are in any way more inclined to witchcraft than anyone else. This is significant, as the idea seems common among the Verre that any significant social event is linked to the loss of a human-life - we have already noted that big harvests cost a kinsman's

life. Formerly, a boy always died during the circumcision ceremony and his parents were told, "A leopard has eaten him". Again, I was told a human life was taken at the *seuka net* (to spit things out, the "things" being items from the new crops), which accurs in late November. Similarly, a *duur maam*, or rather the *deungs* present in it, may demand a human life from someone who asks for its help. It could be said either that the blacksmith represents "culture", skill inherited or acquired by experience rather than by taking of a human life or that the image of the blacksmith as compared with that of the rainmaker represents a jump from mythical to "historical" consciousness.

The only unfavourable comment I have heard on blacksmiths as a class was this, "Blacksmiths are very lazy people. They will not go to farm. If it rains, he (blacksmith) will not come out, he will say it is too cool - nowadays blacksmiths are very active". This criticism evidently represents the view which farmers took of the non-farming blacksmiths of the past. Present-day blacksmiths do in fact farm, and both blacksmiths and non-blacksmiths explain this as being due to necessity. Blacksmithing nowadays will not support them without an additional source of income, but apparently it did in the past. The blacksmith's former reluctance to come out on a rainy day may be a stereotyped attitude considered appropriate to a man who must work with fire.

Let me try to "place" the story of the blacksmith and the rainmaker as a Verre myth. There is no specific category of "myth" in the Verre language, even though people will distinguish

between "folktale" (*seuseuz*), which is specifically regarded as untrue, and true stories, which have actually happened. It seems legitimate, however, to distinguish "myths" from other kinds of Verre narratives, as stories which may, or may not, be believed, but which say something about the world and the working of human society. I have already mentioned the "myth" of the suns which turn into goats, and would like to quote two more.

One is a story of how God said to the first human beings that he would like to bless their children. They produced their ugly children, but kept their good-looking children hidden. The ugly children and their descendants prospered, becoming the lighter-skinned people (Europeans and Fulani), whereas the good-looking children, who were the ancestors of the Verre were doomed to poverty. The second is a narrative of the coming of the colonial administration, in which, no common language being available, the District Officer makes contacts with the hill Verre by going up into the hills and giving them salt which they enjoy. Interestingly, people seemed rather doubtful of the truth of this story.

The goat-sun story is timeless, because it is, so to say, still happening, but it does not seem to have any particular bearing on Verre ideas about goats, or about the passage of time. The story of the hiding of the good-looking children is of a type not uncommon in Africa. It is told to explain the present position of the Verre as a people, but it may well beplaced by one which explains their relative economic under-development as being the

result of injustice by outsiders, rather than their own fault.

The story of the colonial official and his salt is surely perceptive in that it shows the link between colonialism and the spread of new commodities. One man who did not believe it said that the Verre came down from the hills for farming rather than to get salt, an explanation which shows the Verre as acting in their own interests, rather than as being acted on by external forces.

It is conceivable that, at one time, the myth of the blacksmith and the rainmaker was more acutely relevant to Verre political economy than it is today, since the blacksmiths were apparently more prosperous in the past in relation to other Verre and they were, presumably, the section of Verre society most respected by outsiders. Perhaps also the *saa'az* was more significant in the past, since the influence of Christianity and Islam must to some extent have undermined the traditional Verre world view. Yet the myth retains a good deal of relevance, since it deals with the balance of nature and culture and the contrast of ritual and technique. In the past, the myth perhaps helped to contrast the outward-looking blacksmiths with the more purely Verre concerns of the rainmaker, but today the clerks, drivers, and school teachers represent the outward-facing side of Verre life. If I may make a prediction, however, future generations of Verre will find in it an argument that contraries need to be brought into relation by dialogue rather than confrontation, and that the development of Verre country

requires both more satisfactory water supplies and greater training in technical skills.

Note

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As this is a first draft, I shall not provide detailed footnotes and bibliography. There are references to the Verre in O. TEMPLE and C.L. TEMPLE *Notes on the Tribes, Provinces, Emirates and States of the Northern Provinces of Nigeria* (Lagos 1919, 1922) and, of much greater value, in C.K. MEEK, *Tribal Studies in Northern Nigeria* (2 vol, 1931). For material on the cultural, social, and technical relations of blacksmiths in Nigeria and the western Cameroun, see articles, "A Nineteenth Century Ruhr in Central Africa" by Jean-Pierre WARNIER and Ian FOWLER, and "Awka Who Travel" by Nancy C.N. NEAHER, both in *Africa* 1979, number 4. I found L. DE HEUSCH, *Rois nés d'un cœur de vache* (Paris 1982) very useful for its discussion of the imagery of heat and wetness in African religion.