

LIFE AND DEATH IN MANDARA CERAMICS

Judy STERNER

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses one aspect of the sacred pot complex of the Mandara. Here, the death of a person involves their translation from one form of social participation to another. There is thus a relationship between the pots associated with persons' statuses and roles during life and those that continue to be identified with them after death. Examples include pots to house the person's spirit, pots made to celebrate achievement of elder status, pots that denote successful mothers, pots for spirits of enemies killed in warfare, and finials ultimately placed on their owners' tombs. This is in itself of significance for archaeological interpretation. Furthermore, interpretation of inter-ethnic variability in these materials can best be approached through a *symbolic reservoir* model. Our archaeological evidence indicates that the reservoir of which these pots are a materialisation can be traced back to the earliest Iron Age of the region.

Keywords : sacred pots, symbolic reservoir, spirits, elder status, successful women, Mandara.

RÉSUMÉ

LA VIE ET LA MORT DANS LES CÉRAMIQUES DU MANDARA.

Cette communication traite de la céramique "sacrée", employée à des fins religieuses et sociales dans les monts Mandara. Dans cette région, la mort implique une translation d'une forme de participation sociale à une autre. Il y a donc un lien entre les pots associés avec les statuts et rôles sociaux d'une personne pendant sa vie, et ceux qui vont continuer à lui être associés après sa mort. Citons comme exemples les pots utilisés comme demeures des esprits, d'autres fabriqués pour fêter le passage au statut de vieux, ceux qui enferment les esprits des ennemis abattus, et les poteries faitières qui finiront par être posées sur les tombeaux de leurs propriétaires. Ces observations ont une valeur certaine pour l'orientation des interprétations archéologiques. Pour aborder le problème de déchiffrement de la variabilité inter-ethnique dans la culture matérielle, nous proposons le modèle d'un "réservoir de symboles". D'après les données archéologiques disponibles, il semblerait que ce réservoir -dont les pots sacrés sont une expression- remonte à l'époque du plus ancien Age du Fer dans les monts Mandara.

Mots-clés : céramiques sacrées, réservoir de symboles, esprits, statut de vieux, mères, Mandara.

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From the northernmost edge of the Mandara to the Alantika mountains south of the Benue and spanning the Cameroon/Nigerian border, we find the same puzzling, kaleidoscopic recombinations of material culture and ritual, a result perhaps of waves of small groups of immigrants, some refugees, mixing with autochthones, this process repeating itself at intervals for almost two millennia (Juillerat 1971).

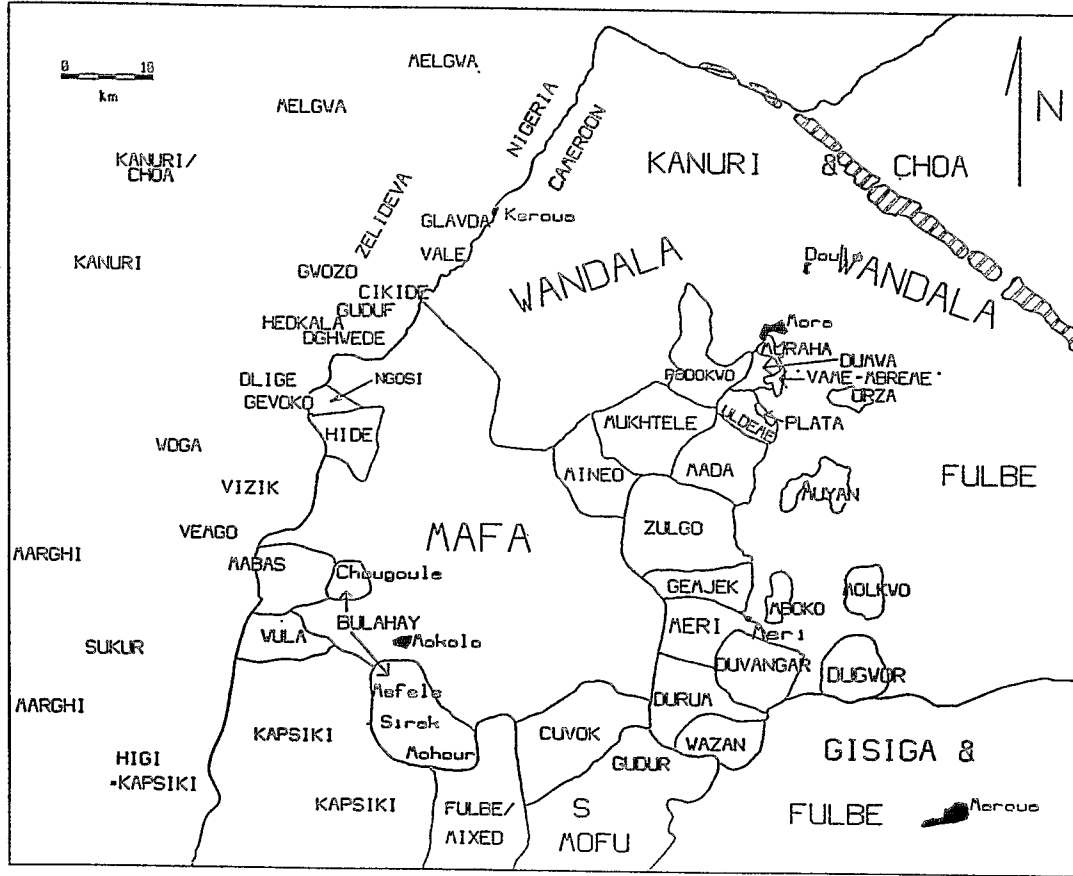


Figure 1 Map of parts of N.E. Nigeria and N. Cameroon, showing ethnic distributions.

Fundamental Sirak (Bulahay)¹ beliefs about life and death which are expressed through ritual and embodied in their ceramic vessels are here analysed using the complementary concepts of "montage" and "symbolic reservoir". Following description in some detail of their ceramics of life and death, comparative materials on other groups of the Mandara are discussed in order to illustrate the shared theme of rearrangement of ideas and objects.

Understanding of the complex culture history of the greater Mandara region through the analysis of material culture and of the ritual in which "lifeless" objects act is approached here by combining the concepts of several scholars. Hodder (1982a) adopted the term *montage* to describe the assembling of motifs from various sources for the purpose of symboling. This reassembly, or mixing and matching, is here applied equally to beliefs and to the motifs that embody them. However these beliefs and material objects are not drawn in this region from alien sources but from a shared *symbolic reservoir*, a concept introduced into African archaeology by Roderick McIntosh (1989). The symbolic reservoir is a store of symbols that different peoples or groups access and utilize in different ways. They are "Symbols in Action" to use Hodder's evocative phrase (1982b).

Conant's (1963) article "The manipulation of ritual among Plateau Nigerians" outlines four ways in which ritual paraphernalia may be manipulated "for a variety of secular purposes". These are:

- deliberate entrustment to potential or actual rivals,
- display to outsiders,
- abandonment, and
- exercise of control over the manufacture and distribution of ritual equipment.

Conant (1963:227) suggests that such manipulative techniques are likely to be of significance for the analysis of topics that include "the spread of art styles, and, more generally, the successful persistence, through time, of relations between societies of very different levels of complexity and organization". Pots are ritual equipment *par excellence* in our region, and

¹ The term Bulahay has been used variously in the literature. (Boutrais 1973; Lembezat 1950, 1961; Martin 1970) to refer to four communities : Mefe, Sirak, Mohour and Chougoulé. The first three lie to the south of the town of Mokolo, whereas Chougoulé is to the northwest and at some distance from the aforementioned settlements. Lembezat (1961) describes them as one of the Matakam groups, the other being Mafahay (Mafa). He further notes that "l'on peut considérer que les Bulahai résultent d'une fusion Mofou-Matakam,..." (1961:12). Barreau, Breton and Dieu (in Boutrais 1984) use the term *mefe* to describe the language spoken by the people of Chougoulé, Mefe, Mohour and Sirak. The designation Bulahay is not accepted by the people to whom it has been applied and it is preferable to refer to each community by its own name, since to consider them all as one group denies their distinct histories and customs. (Another quite separate and distinct use of the term Bulahay is made by Muller-Kosack (1987:26) who attaches it to certain Mafa. "Die Bulahai besiedeln die hohen Relieftteile über 800 oder 900 m, so auch den Hossere Ziver und den Hossere Upai,...").

their manipulation has indeed contributed to the spread of cultural styles and to the maintenance of relations between communities at different or indeed at very similar levels of complexity.

The Sirak are a *mefele*-speaking community located immediately south of Mokolo, in the Mandara highlands (Fig.1). They are frequently referred to by outsiders as *Bulahay*, a category that also comprises the three other *mefele*-speaking communities: Mefe, Mohour and Chougoule. While the inhabitants of these four settlements share some common cultural traits and speak dialects of the same language, many other aspects of social and ceremonial life and history are significantly different. This "même mais différent" aspect of *mefele*-speaking communities is not however restricted to them alone.

Among the Sirak, at either end of the life cycle, at birth and death, pots associated with individuals receive similar treatment. Holes are made in pot bases, not to "kill the pot" but to allow spirits to enter or escape. For the newborn a cooking pot will hold the baby's placenta and its spirit until its human body is ready for it, that is to say when the infant begins to talk. At the end of life, pots that speak of gender or achieved status are placed upside down upon their owner's tomb. Again a hole is pierced in the base, now to allow the spirit of the deceased to escape. These are the only pots to be treated in this manner. For the placenta of a newborn girl a grain or sauce preparation pot is used, and a recycled meat cooking pot for a boy. A woman who has had many children will have her flour storage pot and black burnished sauce pot atop her tomb. A man who became a recognised elder (*gawula*) will have the special pot that commemorates this status placed upon his tomb. If he also was a successful warrior, the pot or pots which contained the spirits of his victims will also be placed there. With the exception of those pots containing placentas, all, whether used in daily food preparation and consumption or made for special achievements and used in prescribed ceremonies, belonged to and were used by the individuals they are associated with and identify. At death and continuing for many years afterwards, other pots are made. These contain the spirits of the dead who have by now become ancestors. They are kept by the descendants and used annually and, when deemed necessary by a diviner, in times of illness or other troubles.

Such Sirak pots can therefore be grossly divided into two categories:

- 1) pots used by individuals during their adult lives and deposited later upon their tombs (thus the pots do not survive their owners), and
- 2) pots made after the end of the period of mourning that will contain the spirit of an ancestor (who in this way continues to reside with her or his descendants). Presence of the first category of pots implies that their owner was married, of the second that he or she had living descendants at the time of death.

The **gawula** pot deserves a more detailed discussion because, while other Mandara groups celebrate the transition from boyhood to manhood (e.g. Mofu of Durrum, Duvangar, Kapsiki), Sirak **gawula** appears to be the only such ceremony that is tied to the elder brother - younger brother relationship, and that is associated with a special pot. An elder brother must be **gawula** before a younger may become one. To become **gawula** one must be married. The ceremony is held every other year (in the year following the bull festival known as **maray**), beginning in August and ending the following March. Only the final ceremony in March will be discussed here because it is for this occasion that the pot, **ver ver ta gawula mazlay**, is made and first used. At each compound where a **gawula** resides beer is served from the **gawula** pot to the new **gawula** initiates. This pot contains the spirit of youth, and to call the men **gawula** is in a way a Sirak joke, for the **gawula** celebration really marks the end of youth and the becoming of an elder. The pot is then kept within the inner courtyard next to the shrine hut that holds the ancestor pots (if the **gawula**'s father is dead) and the meat pot (which is either tripod or rests on a three-pronged branch).

This meat pot of a **gawula** is always kept closed by placing a black burnished eating bowl (**gandaf** or **kelewterey**) in its mouth. These and other pots belonging to a **gawula** may have special decoration: the **kelewterey** has three appliqué pellets below the band of comb impressions beneath the rim; his granary protection pot (**mongurzlaw**) has a stylized appliqué beard.

As a **gawula**, a man is recognised as an elder. Non-**gawula** must crouch down before him, as transformers (the smith-potter caste) and women must do before non-transformer men. Only **gawula** may clap following a prayer, something comparable to the saying of "Amen". A **gawula** is also treated differently in death by being buried in a seated position (rather than lying on the side) and facing west. His funeral lasts longer as does the festival that ends mourning (**maranday**). Before burial his corpse sits in the inner courtyard next to the **gawula** pot and the ancestor shrine. At **maranday** when the family and undertakers share the beer at his tomb, his **gawula** pot is brought to the tomb and there the undertaker pecks a hole in its base and sets it on the tomb. The spirit of youth that the pot contained is thus set free.

In the past when warfare was common a man might also possess a **madzagay** pot. This pot contained the spirit or spirits of enemies killed in battle. The form depended upon the number killed. During his life the pot was kept within the compound. When he died it was placed on his tomb, with a hole pierced in the bottom, along with the **gawula** pot. Some tombs found in one clan's cemetery at Sirak have several **madzagay** and a **gawula** on top. Other **madzagay** pots contained the spirits of large wild cats killed by hunters, and these were kept in clan shrines.

As stated above, the tomb of a woman who has had children has placed upon it her flour storage pot and black sauce bowl. These may be seen as the female equivalent of the man's *gawula* and *madzagay*. Thus pots, for both males and females, represent on the tombs the achievements of life -and all tomb pots have holes pierced in their bases.

Upon death different pots are made for adult males and females. These pots represent the deceased - as one Kapsiki put it "C'est la *photo* du père!" and, like statues of the saints, they are devices by means of which descendants communicate with the ancestors. At Sirak the first ancestor pot is not made until the *maranday* festival that officially ends mourning. This may occur anywhere from 10 days after death (the time required to brew the funeral beer) in the case of a younger person, or up to three months for the oldest man in the community. In the latter case many people must be notified and beer must be made and offered on three separate occasions. For a man the first ancestor pot is called *jewe* and is a miniature version of the pot that will be made later (*mbat ta papan*). In the case of a man or woman lacking descendants, a pot, referred to by the same name, is made and used in a sacrifice made to it, but is then discarded. The *jewe* is consecrated on the first (and only) day of *maranday* for a younger, non-*gawula* man, or on the second day for a *gawula* or a very old man who was not *gawula*. The pot is taken to the tomb where its mouth is sealed with a plug made of a paste of tiger nut (*Cyperus esculentus*) flour and beer.

Other pots are made specially for *maranday*; a serving bowl undecorated except for incisions or rouletting on the rim (*sagam*) is used to serve beer to female members of the deceased's family and later used for any purpose. Undecorated cooking pots are brought as gifts by potters of the same clan as the deceased, for they, unlike other women, may not bring millet flour. This expresses concepts of pollution associated by cultivators with members of the transformer caste.

Later the same day, the *jewe* is carried back down to the compound of the deceased in the calabash that the undertaker used to remove dirt from the tomb. It is placed in the compound overnight. In the case of an elder, prayers are offered on the following day, and two chickens and a goat are sacrificed and their blood dripped over the pot. A male relative from the maternal clan of the deceased conducts the sacrifice and at the same time instructs the eldest son how to make the offering to his father. This son becomes the keeper of his father's spirit and of the pot containing it. This will be kept in the compound of the deceased if he is not yet married. Annual sacrifices will be made here by the son, for, on behalf of the younger brothers and sisters, he is now custodian of his father's spirit pot. Normally the "true" ancestor pot for the father is not made until several years after his death, usually when the son or daughter (if there are no sons or surviving sons the eldest daughter may maintain her father's spirit pot) in charge of the family is well established in their own homestead. At this time the full scale father's pot *mbat ta papan* (sacred of father) is made, incorporating a ground up fragment of the *jewe*'s rim into the body of the new pot.

If the father's father and father's mother are also dead, pots for them are also made (*mbat ta je* and *mbat ta maman ta papan*). A small hut, the *gejek ta mbat* (hut of the sacred) is built within the compound. Father's, father's father and father's mother pots are kept here. In times of trouble (often illness or sterility) offerings to them may be suggested by a diviner. If a married daughter keeps these pots the *gejek ta mbat* must be located on the periphery of her husband's compound, as the spirits of two patriline cannot reside in the same homestead. When a mother dies, her youngest son becomes the keeper of her pot. Again this pot is first used at her *maranday*, however in the case of a woman there is sometimes no intermediate *jewe* stage, and in such a case her pot (*mbat ta maman*) will not be replaced unless it happens to get broken. It is kept in the kitchen of her son's senior wife.

Typically the "rules" for placement of pots within the compound or their treatment are subject to interpretation and may vary. One man keeps his father's mother's pot in the kitchen because the couple had not gotten along well and his father had requested that his spirit pot not be kept with hers. In another compound, a pot for a mother wears the anklets she used to favour around its neck, for the excellently practical reason that "pots have no legs". Even after death, relationships and characteristics of the deceased are expressed in their commemorative vessels.

I have shown above that for the Sirak a variety of pots, both sacred and those that were originally utilitarian, are used as markers of status and gender for the dead as well as for the living. In life as in death, pots, their forms and decorations, reify Sirak beliefs about gender, age and status, the transgenerational nature of society and the spirit world. In death a man's elder status or success as warrior or hunter, or a woman's achievements in childbearing remain visible to the living. For these pots rest upon the tombs for passers-by to see. In contrast the pots that embody the ancestors are hidden away in dark huts or tucked away in blackened kitchens, to be seen once a year or so and only by members of the family.

There is one Sirak pot, no longer made, that can best be employed to illustrate the utility of the "montage" and "symbolic reservoir" concepts. This pot proclaimed to all who passed that the man of this compound was both *gawu la* and the head of his patriline. For the *tzowal*, a slender finial with a beak-like protuberance and line of applique buttons (Fig. 2), sat atop the *gejek ta mbat*. But when the owner died it was thrown away in the bush, never put on his tomb. Many other groups of the area to the east (Mofu of Durum and Gudur), and to the south and southwest (Kapsiki, Gawar [often designated Kortchi], Hina, Daba, Bana, Gude, Njegn and Jimi) also have pot finials. Seignobos (1990) provides an excellent description and illustrations of the finials of this region. The finials of the Gawar, Hina and Daba are similar to those of the Sirak. Amongst other groups, highly elaborate finials normally sit atop the chief's main hut. Others are less elaborate and may be found atop an initiated male's hut, the hut containing the ancestor pots and/or granary or a transformer's entrance hut.

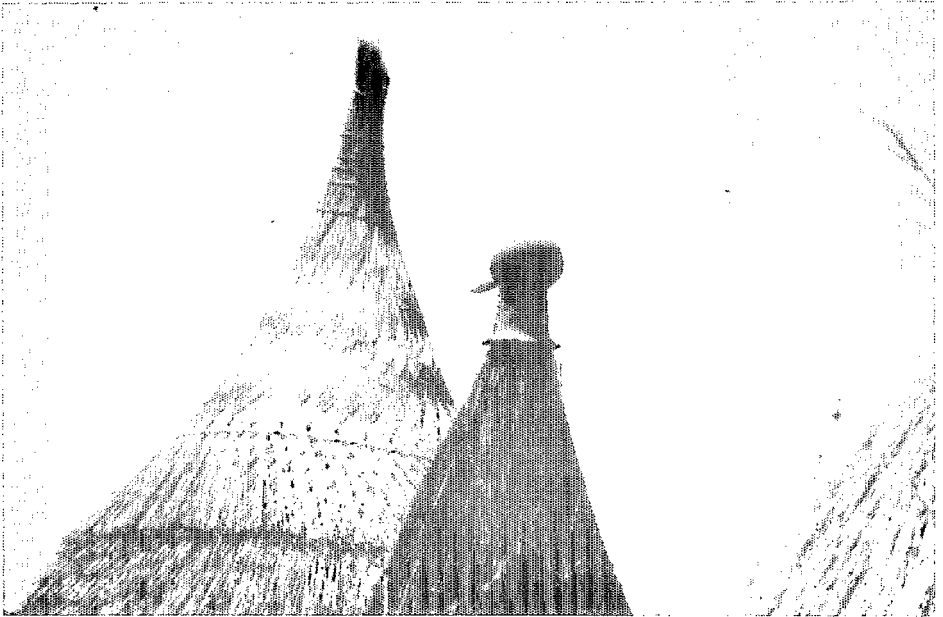


Figure 2 *Sirak finial, t zowa l, atop ancestor shrine hut of a gawu l a elder.*

Among some of these groups certain classes of finials were ultimately deposited upon their owner's tomb. Bana finials are larger and more elaborate than the *t zowa l* of Sirak, but not so elaborate as those of the Gude, Njegn or Jimi chiefs (Seignobos 1990). The Bana finial sat atop the hut of a village chief's millet granary and was later placed upon his tomb, with a hole pierced in the top (corresponding to the bottom of a normal pot). Decoration consists of appliqué pellets or spikes, incisions and three spiky beaks.

Other pots are placed on or around the tombs of the Bana. At times an ancestral spirit may cause problems for the living, requiring an offering to be made. The pot which contained this, a sauce bowl (*h a l a p u*), is then partially buried mouth down on the edge of the tomb -with its base pierced. A Bana tomb contains many family members and consequently a jumble of pots on top and around it, some that contained the food and drink served to the undertakers. The southern Mafa, on the other hand, rarely put pots on tombs. The Gemjek place a beer jar atop a man's tomb and a water pot on a woman's, both with holes pierced in the bases (David this volume). The Kapsiki raise stone uprights on their tombs. A stirrup-spout bottle is the new home for the spirit of a Bana father's father, while the same form at Sirak contains the spirit(s) of enemies killed in battle. The ancestor pots of the Mofu of Durum (Marchesseau 1945), the Mafa and the Mukelehe (Lembezat 1952), to name but a few, are kept in the granary hut, while groups like the Sirak, Gawar and Gadala keep theirs in a special hut.

The decoration of the ancestor pots varies, those of close neighbours being generally more similar than those further distant. The pot containing the spirit of a deceased father or father's father at Sirak has three spikes placed evenly around an incised appliqué band at the neck. For the hill Marghi (Vaughan 1964:393) between a man's personal soul pot and pot shrine of his deceased father "the distinctive difference is the occurrence of two or three small protuberances on the upper portion of the pot -two indicating that the deceased's first child was female, three that it was male." Similar distinctions are made by the Mafa and other groups. As mentioned above, it is a maternal uncle that instructs the new Sirak head of household in the sacrifice to his father's spirit. Among the closely related Mafa it is a member of the transformer caste of the same clan that does the same.

Numerous, in fact endless, examples of the jumbling of elements of decoration and changes in meaning can be drawn from throughout the entire region. Certain themes recur: the holes pierced in tomb pots; finials on chief's, ancestor shrine or granary roofs; pots that hold the spirits of ancestors; pots associated with gender and/or status. In addition, stone, skulls or potsherds may replace or be used in lieu of pots. For example the Sirak may offer sacrifice to a piece of quartz that may represent an ancestor, the spirit of millet or of twins. When a Sirak tomb is reused the skeleton and skull are removed and the skull cached in a rock cleft nearby. It is not too difficult to imagine a relationship between this and the highly developed skull cults of Adamawa-speakers such as the Dowayo or the Koma (Barley 1983; Dumas-Champion 1989; Lukas 1973).

The greater the distance between groups, the greater tend to be the dissimilarities in beliefs and associated material culture, though this is not always the case. As David (this volume) shows, political alliances between montagnard groups have in this area encouraged the abandonment of some items of material culture and a growing together and stylistic assimilation to others that may override linguistic boundaries at the group level.

Juillerat (1971) accounted for the complex present day ethnic distribution in the Mandara by postulating several waves of small groups (often as small as individuals or families) leaving the plains to the north, east and southeast and settling in the mountains. There they frequently encountered autochthonous peoples speaking related Chadic tongues and with whom they merged, especially as those already living in the region possessed knowledge of local spirits and essential rituals. Subsequent group splintering and fusion continued the mixing but also allowed for substantial continuity in ethnic traditions even while the personnel of any particular group might be subject to turnover. Juillerat's description of ethnic formation processes provides the grounds for the manipulation of symbols suggested by Hodder (1982a:213) "In general, the choice of a symbol as part of a present strategy must be affected by at least its immediately previous use. But as soon as a symbol is used in a new context its meaning and its history are altered." The kaleidoscopic pattern of languages (here we must include the Adamawa-speakers) and of material culture *but not of fundamental beliefs* seen today, has been generated by differential selection

and elaboration of items in the symbolic reservoir. MacEachern (1990) also accepts such a scenario for the history of settlement in the northern Mandara.

To conclude, Conant's (1963) four types of manipulation of ritual equipment are all evident in the central Mandara and adjacent regions. In our area control over the manufacture and distribution of ceramics in general and ritual pots in particular is commonly facilitated by the monopolisation of ceramic production in the hands of a transformer caste. It is also significant that this caste has certain supra-ethnic characteristics. Its small numbers stimulate community exogamy of its members, and bi- or multi-linguality often assists transformers in making marriages across linguistic boundaries and even between groups among whom small scale warfare was endemic. Secondly, while we cannot demonstrate the deliberate entrustment of ceramic types in our area to potential or actual rivals, it is clear from Jouaux's (1989) and Seignobos' (1991) accounts of the priest-chieftdom of Gudur that entrustment of other ritual paraphernalia was a major instrument of policy. To the southwest in the Gongola basin, Berns (1989) has found plentiful examples of what can only be entrustment of figured ceramics (though none specifically associated with death). Thus this form of manipulation also is almost certain to have taken place in our region. Thirdly, while most ceramic items were displayed primarily to the home community, even to the individual family, the finials had a more assertive role that in some cases transcended the death of their owners. Lastly, we have already mentioned that the changing ceramic suites of, for example, the Mabas and the Hide, who have assimilated in many material and other ways to their allies the Wula and the Mafa, imply the abandonment of some items of their former ceramic heritage. Seignobos (1990) "Note sur les poteries faïtières du Nord-Cameroun" perhaps best illustrates the complex mixture of forms of the finials and their multiple uses amongst a variety of "ethnic" groups. It is true to say however that the changes appear on the whole to have involved rather minor stylistic than substantive aspects of the pots -as all these groups access the same symbolic reservoir, mixing and matching the items found in the waters from its millennial springs.

University of Calgary, Canada

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The research on which this paper is based was carried out under authorisations from the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research of Cameroon, and within the context of a Protocole d'Accord de Coopération between the University of Calgary and ORSTOM, France. It was supported by Canadian Social Science and Humanities Research Council grants (410-85-1040, 410-88-0361, 410-89-0871).

I thank the Institute of Human Studies, Cameroon, and particularly its Chief of the Northern Section, M. Eldridge Mohammadou, for many kinds of assistance; also ORSTOM for logistic support and Michèle Delneuf for much hospitality and discussion. My colleagues on the Mandara Archaeological Project, Nicholas David, Kodzo Gavua

and Scott MacEachern offered valuable comments. I gratefully acknowledge my debt to Kodje Dadai my Sirak assistant and to the people of Sirak for sharing their world with me, and to Nai Tomassa for introducing us to the Bana.

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