

THE SNAKE IN THE SPRING SPIRITUAL DIMENSIONS OF WATER IN THE MURI MOUNTAINS

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Abstract

The Muri mountains are inhabited by various small ethnic groups, linguistically representing two entirely different language families, namely Chadic and Niger-Congo. In the paper ideas associated with the different forms of water (rain, spring, river, well, etc.) prevalent among these peoples are examined.

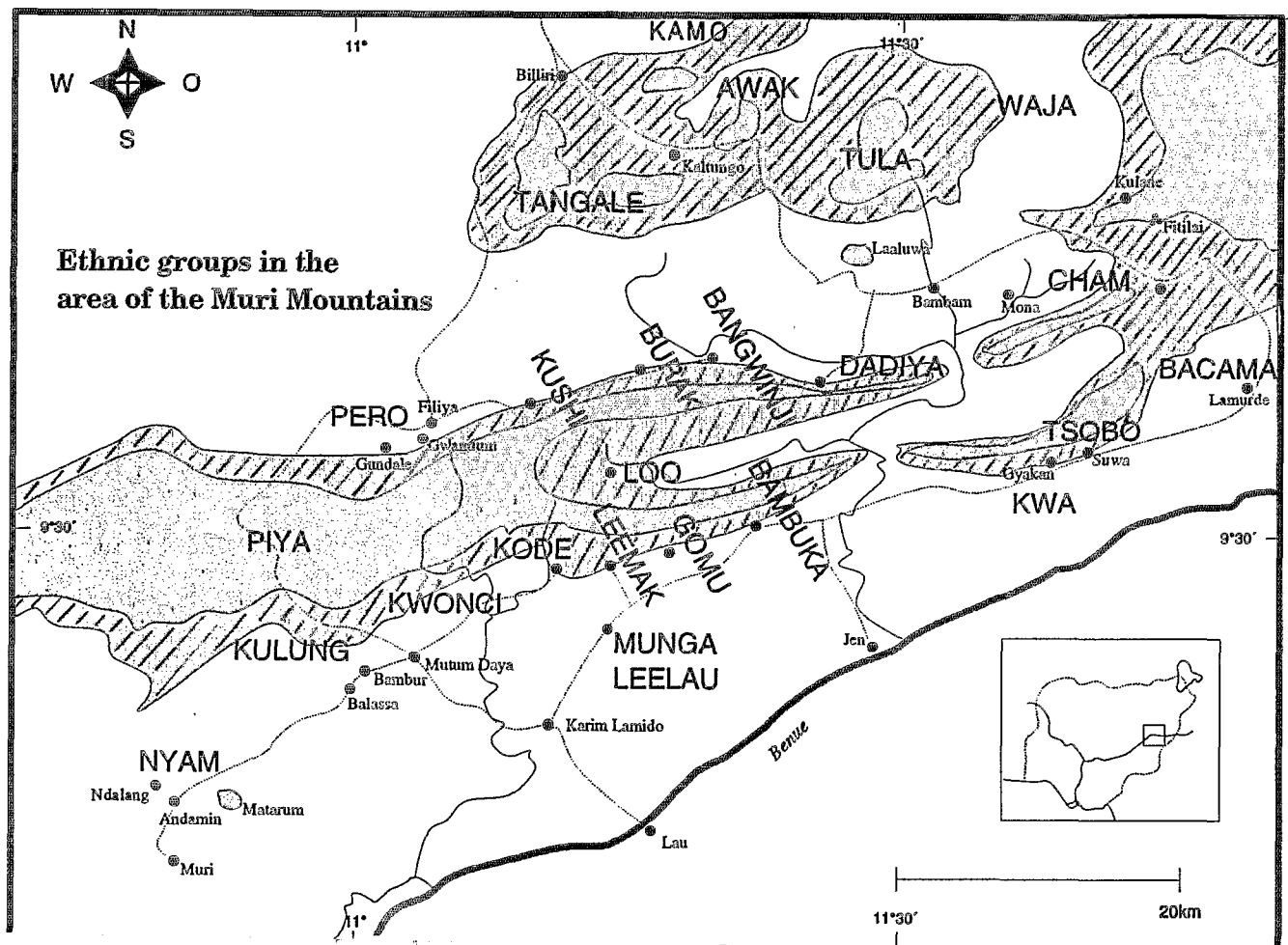
While the form and symbolic content of rain-rituals differ, the belief, that the water in a spring is provided by a certain snake is common to all the different groups. Certain prohibitions with regard to fetching water are to be observed, which are based on a fundamental cosmological classification of persons/objects as hot or cool respectively. Although some descent groups are said to have their origin in water, this does not give them privileged access to functions or titles connected with water.

Keywords : cosmology, water-spirits, Chadic languages, Niger-Congo languages, Muri mountains, North-Eastern Nigeria.

Résumé

Les monts Muri sont habités par des petits groupes ethniques qui représentent, sur le plan linguistique, deux familles de langues complètement différentes (tchadique et niger-congo). Dans cet article, les idées associées aux différentes formes de l'eau seront examinées. Alors que la forme et la symbolique contenues dans les rituels de la pluie diffèrent, la croyance que l'eau de source est apportée par un serpent particulier est commune aux différents groupes. Certaines interdictions concernant le transport de l'eau sont observées, lesquelles sont basées sur une classification cosmologique fondamentale des personnes ou des objets, respectivement comme chaud et froid. Bien que certains groupes disent qu'ils proviennent de l'eau, ceci ne leur donne pas un accès privilégié aux fonctions et aux titres en rapport avec l'eau.

Mots-clés : cosmologie, génies de l'eau, langues tchadiques, langues niger-congo, monts Muri, Nigéria du nord-est.



1. Some environmental conditions with regard to water

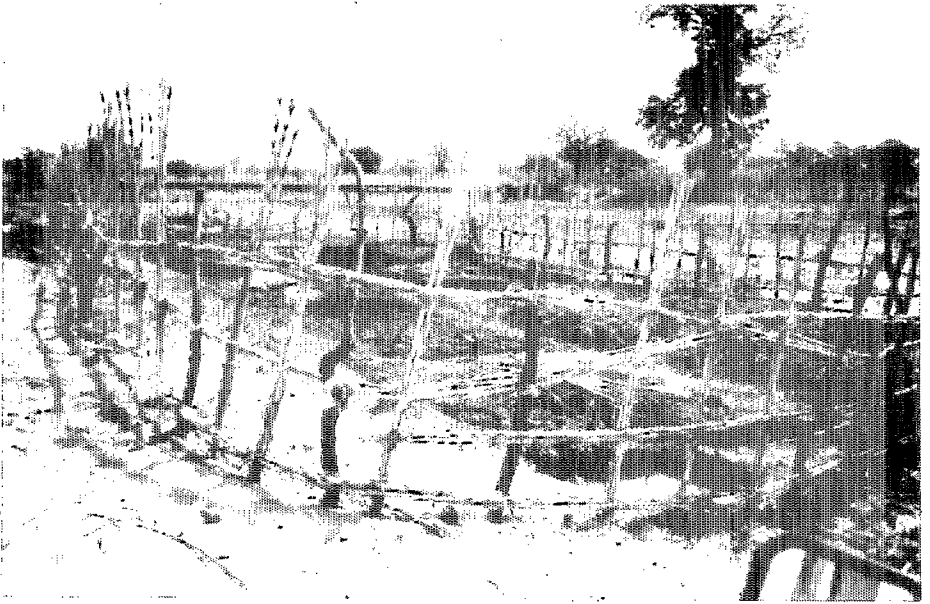
The Muri mountains are a chain of sandstone mountains stretching along the borders between Bauchi State to the North and the States of Taraba and Adamawa to the South. They are approximately 80 km long and 20 km wide and their highest peaks reach up to about 1000 m above sea level. In their eastern part they enclose a basin within two nearly parallel running mountain chains. Precipitation in the Muri mountains is about 800-900 mm per year. The rainy season here usually lasts from April to October with its peak in August which may bring a mean monthly rainfall of up to 300 mm (cf. AITCHISON et al. 1972:6 sqq.). Because of the pronounced differences between mountainous areas and basins, precipitation may vary considerably within relatively short distances. For example in 1992 the northern parts of the mountains received an extraordinarily high amount of rainfall, while in the southern parts it is reported to have rained less than in previous years.

Besides a system of seasonal watercourses there are also perennial streams. Among the seasonal rivers a very important one runs from west to east draining the northern slopes of the Muri mountains before turning southward, cutting through the mountain ranges and flowing into the Benue. This river in its various parts is named differently each time it enters the area of another ethnic group. At geologically suitable places on the mountain ranges, springs emerge. At Ruwan Zafi ("hot water" in Hausa), at the southern slopes of the eastern mountains there is even a hot spring. The largest perennial watercourse within the region, the river Benue, is out of the immediate reach of the mountain population and therefore its relevance is secondary to most of them.

2. Economic use of water

The availability of water is a prerequisite for the establishment of settlements and everywhere in the Muri mountains settlements are near to a source of water, may this be a spring or a stream. Water for drinking or washing purposes is either fetched from springs, perennial streams, from water holes dug into the bed of an annual river during the dry season, from wells or the few hand pumps which have been installed at some settlements in the area. Fetching of water is only done by women or children.

Irrigated agriculture is only practised to a limited extend along perennial streams. Some small vegetable gardens may be established there, normally fenced to protect them from roaming animals, and the plants are irrigated by hand with the help of a container.



No. 1: Irrigated garden on the bank of a river near Kode.

More widespread is the cultivation of crops like rice in river valleys (*fadama* areas) or in depressions where rain-water is retained. Fruit trees like mango or banana are planted near rivers or other water sources. Recently a dam has been erected near Cham providing water for irrigated agriculture on a larger scale.

3. The ethnic and linguistic groups of the area

The Muri mountains are inhabited by a relatively large number of ethnic groups linguistically representing two entirely different language families, and again distinct groups within these families. Languages belonging to the southern Bole-Tangale group of the West Chadic language family are located in the western parts of the mountains, in the eastern parts two separate groups (Waja and Bikwin) of Northwestern Adamawa (or Trans-Benue) languages of the Niger-Congo language family are to be found, and in the South-West a Jarawan Bantu language (Kulung) is spoken which is classified under Niger-Congo as well (for more details see ADELBERGER & KLEINWILLINGHÖFER 1992).

During my work on a comparative, historically oriented project in the area, I investigated into the history of the clans or subunits constituting the different ethnic groups. In some places I came across the statement that a certain clan has its origin in water or more particularly in a stream. Thus I became interested in gathering ideas about water prevalent in the area.

It is obvious that an even and detailed coverage of the topic among all the various groups in the region was impossible. I concentrated especially on the Bangwinji in the eastern Muri mountains and this is why I shall refer to them more than to other groups. But I was able to discern some basic ideas about water from nearly all the groups. In the following I shall sketch the most prominent ideas about and attitudes toward the different forms of water which may either be celestial, coming from the sky as rain, or be terrestrial and be found on the ground as a spring, river, pool, well or borehole. It should be understood that these ideas are part of the traditional culture and are not fully shared by adherents of the Christian or Muslim faith.

4. Springs

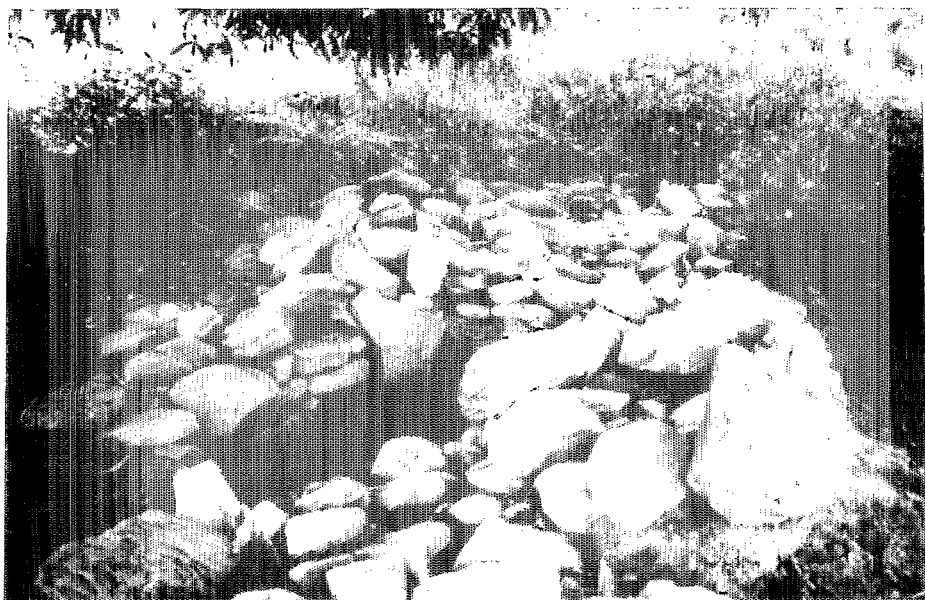
It was most interesting for me, that despite their linguistic and cultural diversity, there is a belief common to all the various groups, that the water of a spring is brought by a spirit embodied in a special snake. This snake is said to live inside the spring and was usually described to me as being large, shiny, and having two horns on its head.

If the descriptions refer to a real snake, I am unable to identify it definitely. Because of its habitat, it is most likely an African Python, and when discussing the issue with informants they regularly compared or even identified it with a python. However, the python has no horns. There are some species of vipers which have something similar to horns on their head, namely the Gaboon Viper, the Rhinoceros Viper and the Horned or Sand Viper. Out of the three, it is the Rhinoceros Vipers which likes moist places, but it is generally not a tall snake (cf. CANSDALE 1981).

Among the Bangwinji the snake is regarded to be an agent of the mountain spirit *bang*, thus ultimately it is *bang* who brings the water through his intermediary, the snake. Since the snake secures the steady flow of water, it may not be tampered with or annoyed. Other animals like tortoises or frogs living inside a spring are sometimes also considered to have relevance in securing the flow of water. Obvious acts aimed against the snake or its fellows like hunting for them or fishing will result in the drying up of the spring or a decrease in the amount of water. Cutting a tree in the vicinity of the spring is another act resulting in an irritation of the water spirits.

Besides these obvious acts there are also certain prohibitions which have to be observed in order to secure the steady flow of water and prevent its drying up. The water may not be fetched by a woman during her menstruation or up to three months after her having giving birth. Some informants even stated that one may not use the container of such a woman for fetching water. And in most places the water may not be fetched in a container made of metal, in some places it may also not be made of plastic. The favoured container is a calabash, but it should be an undecorated one. Nonobservation of these rules will annoy the snake with the already mentioned consequences.

At Bangwinji and at Bambuka I could observe that the spring is covered with logs and stones, protecting the water from pollution and providing a shelter for the animals/spirits inside.



No. 2: Spring at Bangwinji being covered with logs and stones to prevent pollution and provide shelter for the water-securing snake.

This method of protection is, however, not practised at Kushi.



No. 3: Spring at Kushi without cover.

It is either the community using the spring or a certain descent group who has to take care of it, keep it clean and perform the necessary rituals if any of the prohibitions has been violated. It seems that usually those people who discovered the spring first and settled in its vicinity are the ones being responsible for the ritual custody, as is the case among the Kulung and the Kushi.

Has any disturbance occurred or the flow of water is diminishing, then some rituals have to be performed at the spring to appease the snake. Among the Bangwinji, a certain priest will prepare a concoction by chewing the leaves of the locust bean tree (*Parkia filicoidea*) together with a special millet beer (*pito* in Hausa) and spit it into the water. In other places, the rituals involve the offering of millet beer and the sacrifice of a chicken or even a goat. In Cham there is a spring of which the water may turn red, thus indicating an irritation of the water spirits which then have to be appeased by a sacrifice. Before this is done, it is dangerous for women to fetch water there.

5. Wells and boreholes

To man-made water sources like boreholes or wells the regulations valid for a spring do apply with some modifications. That is, metal buckets may be used here, but no menstruating woman or one shortly after having delivered may fetch water.

6. Rivers

With regard to streams or rivers, none of the above mentioned prohibitions do apply. One may fish there or hunt reptiles and water may be fetched by anyone and with any container. It is believed that rivers, and especially those parts encompassed by dense bush, are the home of evil spirits dangerous to man. It may be, however, that it is not the river as such but the dense bush which provides a home for those spirits.

7. Pools and lakes

I have only limited information on pools and lakes. Like in other water places, there may reside spirits or some extraordinary feature is attributed to it. At Bangwinji there is a pool which will show that somebody has died among the Kamo people with whom they are close friends by changing its colour into red. In the above mentioned lake at Ruwan Zafi, which is fed by a hot spring, a powerful and dangerous spirit resides and people are even afraid to mention its name.

8. Rain

With regard to rainfall, we may distinguish between those rituals which occur within the cycle of the agricultural calendar and are meant to ensure a good farming season in general, including sufficient rainfall, and those which are performed when, against all expectations, rain has not yet come or even a drought is experienced. Here I shall only consider the latter because they are particularly related to rain.

Among the Bangwinji, a very interesting rain ritual is performed which involves a certain sacral wall (*lookunga*). This wall is circular and built of dry stones, resembling a house without roof. At a certain point in the ritual, the wall is destroyed and this is the decisive act which causes the rain to come. When it has rained enough, the wall will be built up again making the rain discontinue. Even if somebody takes out a stone from the wall or tears it down without the proper ritual, rain will fall, however, in an uncontrollable and damaging way, for it was not done within the context of the appropriate ritual action. As with the water in a spring, it is the mountain spirit *bang* who is here considered to bring

the rain. Also among most of the other groups in the Muri mountains, it is the same spirit which is believed to bring both rain and terrestrial water. More often it is called *mam* (among Adamawa speakers) or *dambang* or *dabang* (among Chadic speakers). We must, however, be careful not to generalise too much. Although among the Piya the cult of *dambang* exists, it is the collective ancestral spirits of each clan being addressed when in need of rain.

It is also an amphibious animal, the frog, which is associated with rain. The Bangwinji say that the croaking of the frogs attracts rain, too. But they cannot be manipulated to do so. One may find some water jars being decorated with a stylized frog.



No. 4: Stylized frog on a water jar at Bangwinji.

Among the Kulung on the western end of the Muri mountains, the main rain ritual involves a special pot which is put with its mouth facing the sky and eventually filled with rain-water. The same symbolism, the open mouth of a container attracting rain, can be found among the Bangwinji, where a calabash with water placed in a field is said to attract rainfall. While here the rain ritual involving the special wall is meant to attract rainfall in general, the pot in the field is intended to attract rain to the area of the field and even out possible spatial variations of precipitation.

9. Some interpretations

All the prohibitions and regulations mentioned above are meant to prevent any disturbance of the spirits which are believed to bring the water. No malevolent intrusion into the given order may occur, and some persons and objects seem to possess certain qualities which will cause a disruption. Any contact between such persons/objects and the water-bringing spirit should be avoided. Therefore most regulations have to be observed at a spring and less at a river because of the differing distance between the residence of the water-supplying spirit and the place of fetching water.

The basic concept behind the ideas and the resulting prohibitions appears to be what has been called a thermodynamic code, widespread among many African peoples (cf. FARDON 1990: 80-81, HEUSCH 1985: 38 ff.). The basic opposition between coolness and heat structures the cosmological order and through metaphorical or metonymical links different beings and items are classified as being hot or cool respectively. Water is cool and the python by virtue of its habitat and smooth movements is a cool animal and therefore signifies water. Also other reptiles and amphibians are connected with water and thus with coolness. On the other side, metal objects are classified as hot through their link with fire during the production process, as well as a calabash with decoration which mostly has been applied by pyro-engraving. Plastic as a new material has not everywhere been included into this classificatory system, but where it is, it is regarded to be hot. Women during menstruation and after having given birth are hot by their association with blood. Any contact between hot persons or objects and the cool, water-bringing snake will disturb it and cause a diminishing supply of water or even its termination.

But a menstruating woman or one having delivered is also considered to be unclean and water fetched or food prepared by her will make a man to become weak and attract bad luck or injuries during hunting. By contact these women may affect the water of other women and the prohibition on their fetching water at a well or borehole, which is apart from the residence of the snake, probably stems from that reason.

Referring to the above mentioned springs and pools, the water, which is cool, by changing its colour into red, which is a metaphor for fire and heat, indicates a disruption of the cosmological order, that a death has occurred or spirits have been disturbed. And it seems plausible that the spirit living in the hot spring at Ruwan Zafi is regarded to be especially wicked because here the water has the qualities of both coolness and heat, uniting the fundamental oppositions and posing a phenomenon beyond the basic cosmological categories.

Even when they are not wholly considered to be evil, as those residing in dense bush along streams, some water spirits are ambiguous in their attitudes towards humans. At Munga Leelau a pregnant woman must protect her unborn child by wearing an iron armlet when fetching water at dusk or dawn. Also among the Kulung it was considered to be dangerous for pregnant women as well as for children to fetch water at certain times. And at Bambuka there is a spring where rituals are performed but no water may be fetched there directly, only more downstream. Depending on its power, the spirit residing in the water is regarded to be able to harm either a defenceless unborn baby, a child or even an adult.

It seems, that the extraordinary powers associated with water account for its use as a means for divination or diagnostics. Among the Bangwinji, when trying to find out the reasons for a certain disease, for barrenness or an unhappy incident, the traditional healer uses a calabash filled with water to look into it. It is interesting to note that these healers come very often from the clan Nafuwab whose origin is believed to be in a stream.

That brings us back to the observation which made me start this investigation. So far I did not find evidence that those groups having their origin in water are especially privileged to deal ritually with water or have privileged access to titles associated with water or rain. It is only in a more general sense, by the association of water with fertility, that they seem to be privileged for treating barrenness. The example of the Bangwinji has just been mentioned, but more specifically we can see this among the Kwa. Here some of the male members of the Kagba clan, who are said to have come out from water, will cure a woman from infertility by going with her to a river, entering it and conversing with the water spirits. And it might not be an over-interpretation to associate them with (water)snakes since only members of this clan like to eat frogs.

So far I am still lacking information on some of the groups, and where this is the case, it is indicated by a question mark. Wherever the available information allowed it, I distinguished between the title of Village Head (VH), who represents the local political authority since the colonial period, and a more traditional chieftaincy (trad.) prevalent in precolonial times, which was uninfluenced by an external administration.

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Appendix 1: Names for the water-providing snake in some languages:

Bangwinji:	<i>jim</i>
Dadiya:	<i>jum</i>
Cham:	<i>wenahiyu</i>
Burak:	<i>nung da taldit (kem lem da taldit)</i>
Bambuka:	<i>biyokmu</i>
Leemak:	<i>biling</i>
Piya:	<i>kureeru</i>
Kode:	<i>baalo</i>
Kulung:	<i>gumur</i>

Appendix 2: The association of descent groups with water / rainpriest title / chieftaincy among various ethnic groups:

ethnic group	origin in water	rainpriest	chieftaincy
Bangwinji	Naafuwab	Nakwatreb	Bishomeb- Doleneb (trad.) Bikwakleb (VH) Lookwiila (VH & trad.)
Dadiya	Loobwere, Lookulakuli	Lookwiila/Loofula	
Cham		Kwaasir/Bige	Bige (VH)
Tsobo		Bambo	Kasibo (VH)
Kwa	Nyakagba	?	Nyadwei (trad.)
Bambuka		Nyangwakemfu	Nyangwakemfu (VH & trad.)
Munga Leelau		Munziga	Taanyam (trad.)
Gomu		Yaagok	Yaagok (trad.)
Leemak		Biikob	?
Burak		Shaalo	Waawo-Lowiri/ Waawo-Shangang (VH)
Loo		Bana	?
Kushi		Dongo	Gubno (trad., VH)
Kode		Kooyang-Lawiyang/ Fobelmi-Munang	Fobelmi-Cwexe (VH)
Pero	Anyaxarad	?	Windali (VH Gundale), Pilaami (VH Gwandum)
Piya		(Congu)	various clans
Nyam		?	Kandere (VH)
Kulung		Bambughu	Tabulo (trad.)