

**LES GENS DE NGOLELE:
AN EXAMINATION OF PREHISTORIC
ETHNIC RELATIONS IN THE NORTHERN
MANDARA MOUNTAINS**

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Abstract

People of a number of montagnard lineages in the northern Mandara Mountains of Cameroon say that their ancestors came from a mountain called Ngolélé, which can be identified as part of the Zalideva Hills in northeastern Nigeria. This has long been recognized for lineages of the Plata, Urza and Dumwa groups, but there is evidence that certain Uldeme, Mora and Podokwo lineages also participated.

A widespread tradition also exists among these groups that, at Ngolélé, they were part of a community which included the ancestors of the Wandala, who are now Muslim plains-dwellers. It is argued that these traditions refer to a period of

reduced ethnic tensions, before conversion of part of the population to Islam and before intensive occupation of the Mandara mountains by refugees. The significance of these traditions to linguistic and archaeological reconstructions will be discussed.

Introduction

The most striking cultural fact in the borderlands of the northern Mandara Mountains of Cameroon is the dichotomy between mountains and plains which exists there. Nothing would seem clearer. On the one hand, we have the Mandara Mountains themselves, inhabited by a large number of small non-Muslim groups, packed into circumscribed areas at high population densities, existing in an intensely domesticated landscape. On the other hand, the plains stretching north to Lake Chad seem very much a part of the Muslim Sudanic world, dominated (at low population densities) by states and chiefdoms of various sizes, with literate elites, social stratification, long-distance political and trade relationships, and all of the other trappings of complex societies.

We must ask ourselves how such a complex ethnic mosaic came into existence, and what its dynamics were. We need to know much more about the relative importance of migrant and autochthonous groups, about indigenous developments and external introductions. We need to know if the varying linguistic, archaeological and ethnographic data on this area can be reconciled. We need, especially, to understand the actual

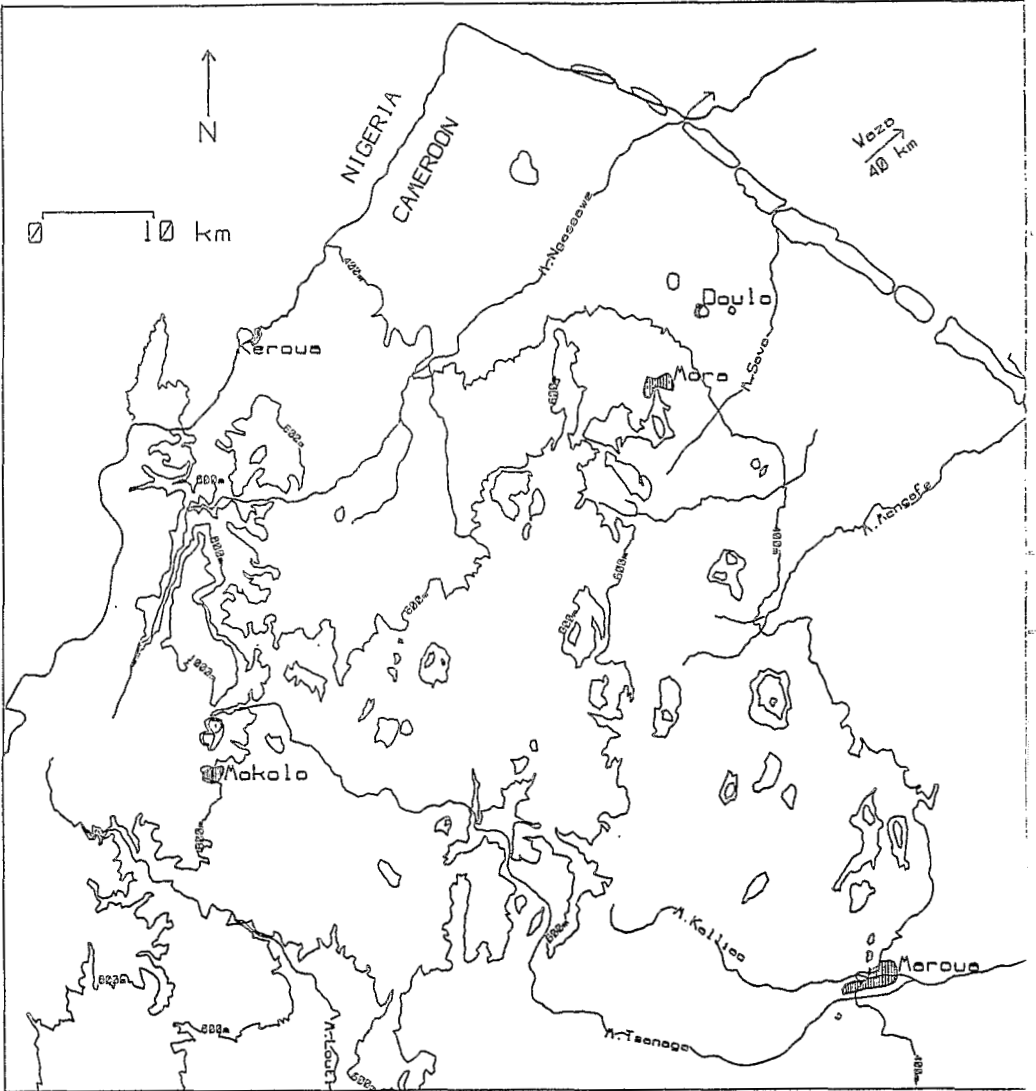
relations between these very different social groups, and the ways in which these relations may have developed. This paper will attempt to describe pre- and protohistoric social relations in one part of the Mandara Mountains.

The northern Mandara Mountains : ethnicity today

At present, the northern Mandara Mountains and the plains surrounding them are inhabited by a melange of Chadic-, Semitic-, Saharan- and West Atlantic-speaking peoples. The Chadic-speakers have been there much the longest. Most are descendants of non-Muslim (and so "pagan") montagnard farmers, many of whom have been tempted or forced down from their mountain homes since the start of European colonization and, especially, since independence.

On the plains, the Muslim Wandala state controlled an area which varied in extent (see Figure 1). At its maximum, it extended from Maroua in the south to Waza in the north, and from Nigeria territory eastward out onto the plains of the Diamare (MOHAMMADOU 1982 : 189-193). The Wandala speak a Chadic language closely related to those of their montagnard neighbours, with whom they have a long history of conflict. They have had three successive capitals in the territories they control, at Keroua, Doulo and Mora. Their society is literate and hierarchical, with a class system and elaborate bureaucracy and court.

Figure 1 : The northern Mandara Mountains of Cameroon and their environs. (The massif is defined by the 600m contour).



There are a large number of montagnard groups living near the present Wandala capital at Mora. These are usually amalgamated on a linguistic basis, but it seems unlikely that these so-called "ethnic" groupings ever had much corporate identity above the level of the lineage or territorial lineage group (CUIGNET 1968, JUILLERAT 1971, MACEACHERN 1987). Montagnard groups around Mora include the Muhara, or "Kirdi" ("pagan") -Mora", who speak a Wandala dialect, the Podokwo, who speak a closely related language, and a loose grouping of lineages speaking the Plata (*pelasla*) language, which is more distantly related to the others in the area (BARRETEAU 1987). Plata speakers include members of the "Vame-Mbrema", Urza, Dumwa and Plata groups. Further data on these groups may be found in NYSSSENS (1986). It is with the origins of lineages of these montagnard groups, plus the Wandala, that this paper will be concerned.

"Les gens de Ngolele"

It has been known for some time that certain Plata-speaking groups traced their lineage origins to a migration from the west, from Nigeria. For example, MOUCHET (1947a, b, c) gives details of a western origin for lineages of the Plata, Dumwa and Urza groups. I have conducted oral historical research in this area, mostly with Plata, but also with Urza, Dumwa and other informants. I have also worked near their putative place of origin, there with Glavda/Vale informants. The accounts

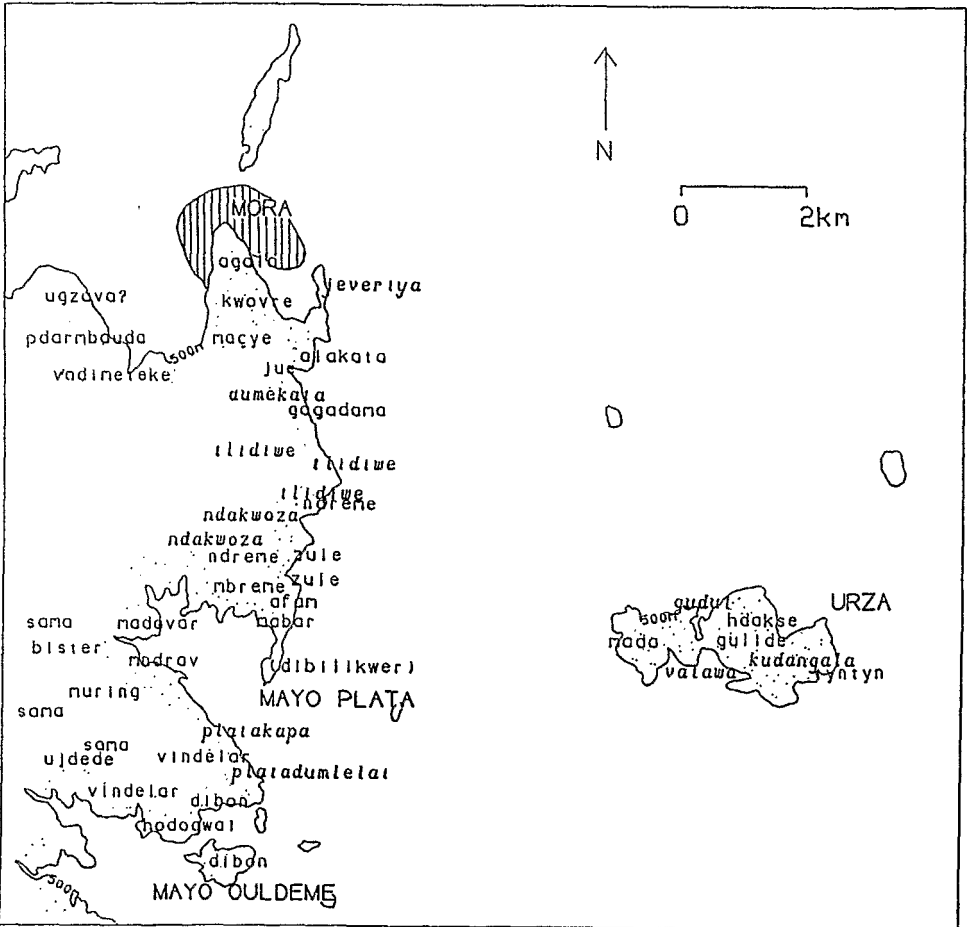
refer to the origins of all of the Plata (*dumlelai* and *kapa*) and Dumwa (*tlidiwe*, *ndakwoza* and *dume-kata*) lineages and of a number of Urza lineages, definitely the *gudul* and *kudangala*, and probably the *valawa* (see Figure 2).

In their major characteristics, the stories of all of these people agree. They say that they came from the west, from a mountain called Ngolélé. The mountain Ngolélé is not difficult to locate, since it is always associated with the territory of the *zelideva*, a montagnard group who live on the massif to the west of Keroua and who speak a language related to those spoken around Mora. Glavda informants, living near Keroua, identify Ngolélé with part of the "Zelideva Hills", the crest of the extreme northwest Mandara Mountains (Figures 1, 3) (Directorate of Overseas Surveys 1969).

Only a few people made the move from Ngolélé, impelled by a famine and what people thought was a disease in millet crops. The movement appears to have been direct; there are no traditions of intermediate settlement along the route, although some people (notably Urza ancestors) arrived first. They found the area south and east of Mora only sparsely settled, and stayed there.

Their common origin at Ngolélé appears to engender a feeling of some kinship between members of these different lineages, although this is not now translated into any formal relationship. It is recognized that they are all descendants of

Figure 2 : Montagnard clans between Mora and Mayo Ouldeme. Clans which probably originated at Ngolélé have names given in italics.



"les gens de Ngolélé", which would give them certain privileges should they ever visit that place, and there is a tradition that marriage interdicts used to exist among the different lineages.

I should emphasize that not only Plata, Dumwa and Urza informants agree on this story; Glavda and one Valé informant at Keroua know of Ngolélé mountain directly, and their accounts of the migration tally with those of the emigrants. This strongly supports the general truth of the story, since these two areas are 40 - 50 km apart, and montagnard mobility is relatively limited.

This migration is widely recognized for the Plata, Dumwa and Urza; what of other groups? Did other people come with them? The Plata say that the ancestor of a group of Uldémé lineages, Agzavrindja, also emigrated from near Ngolélé to Uldémé territory just prior to the movement of the ancestor of the Plata; a year in advance is often mentioned. Agzavrindja is an Uldémé culture hero (see DE COLOMBEL 1986) well known to the Plata from their close contact (bilingualism, intermarriage and adoption of Uldémé cultural elements) with those people. It is, of course, possible that the Plata have incorporated an Uldémé hero into their own migration story. There is no evidence that the Uldémé think that Agzavrindja came from Ngolélé; traditions are obscure on his origins, although the manner of his arrival at Uldémé does parallel Plata accounts (DE COLOMBEL 1986:19-23). In both cases it is said that he was pursued by the Wandala and escaped by magical means; the Plata migration was, by all accounts, much more peaceful. At this point it is

safest to leave the question of western origins of the descendants of Agzavrindja open, but it is certainly something should be further investigated among the Uldémé.

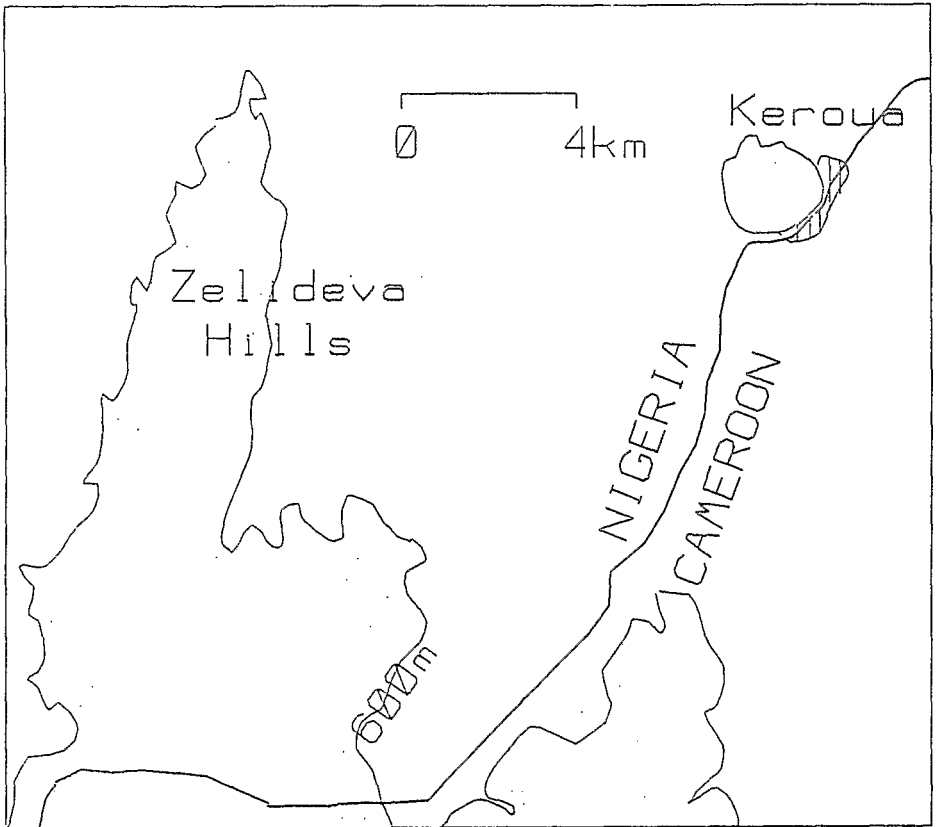
It is also said by some Muraha people that one of their lineages, *jeveriya*, came from Ngolélé, but I have not yet been able to test this. Again, although all Podokwo lineages trace their ancestry to the north, to Waza (but see below), there is some evidence of a western origin. The Podokwo language, *parekwa*, is closely related to Wandala and so to other languages spoken near Keroua and Ngolélé today. There is also a close resemblance between the name of one Uldeme clan, *tala debahé* or *sala devahé*, and the *zelideva* grouping near Ngolélé.

There is also some evidence of origins near Keroua for certain Muktelé groups; the name of one particular group of immigrants from the west, the *dakada-wasa* (JUILLERAT 1971:59-60, 66), might also indicate that the Podokwo account of origin "at Waza" might not actually refer to the inselberg of the same name. The Muktelé language, *matal*, may also be a part of the Wandala group (BARRETEAU, pers. comm.).

It is thus probable that a number of montagnard lineages in the area around Mora originated in the northwestern Mandara Mountains, near Keroua/Ngolélé. This may not indicate large-scale population movement - indeed, the traditional view is that it did - but I think it does very strongly indicate that many

lineages now living near Mora did originate in the west. Such a migration would be critical in establishing the present ethnic patterning of much of the northern Mandara area.

Figure 3 : The "Zelideva Hills" and Keroua.



Ngolélé and the Wandala

The mountain Ngolélé itself seems to have become a somewhat mythologized place in the minds of the descendants of the emigrants. The mountain is said to be inhabited by only a few old men, who make sacrifices there. Other recent inhabitants have moved down on to the plains, much as have the Plata, Dumwa and Urza themselves over the last 30 years. Ngolélé may only be approached by its recent residents or by the descendants of those who emigrated to the west; any others who come near will die.

Only one tree grows on the mountain, the fig *dikwa*, which will respond to the commands of those who may approach the mountain safely. The descendants of "les gens de Ngolélé" can tell it to grow, to sink back into earth, to put out leaves, to let leaves fall. Branches of the tree *dikwa* have been brought back to the Mora area in the past, and were used for sacrifices there. Glavda and Valé informants also comment that Ngolélé is almost treeless, but they do not ascribe any magical significances to the tree(s) found there.

Determining the time of this storied migration from Ngolélé is very difficult -- as chronological and absolute time-depth so often are in ethnohistorical research. A number of genealogies given by Plata Dumlelai and Urza men, and originating from the time of departure from Ngolélé, are 8-10 generations long -- a period of perhaps 175-250 years. A few others only extend back about 6 generations, but here generations appear to have been dropped; they are segments

of the longer genealogies and do not have their internal consistency. We know that the Plata and Urza were in their present position 160 years ago, since DENHAM mentions them (DENHAM, CLAPPERTON and OUDNEY 1826:127). On internal evidence only, then, we may place the migration from Ngolélé at at least 175-250 years ago; it may well have been considerably longer and it would not be wise to depend very much upon the chronology that such genealogies produce.

Informants cannot tell us much about life at Ngolélé; they know a certain amount about who the neighbouring groups were, but there is a general assumption that life was much as it was near Mora in their own recent past. One thing that all of these people -- Plata, Dumwa, Urza, Glavda, Valé -- agree on is that, before "les gens de Ngolélé" migrated to the east, the Wandala were their brothers and they lived in peace together.

To those familiar with the present ethnic situation in the area, this is almost a shocking statement. The Muslim Wandala regularly raided the mountains for slaves and violent conflict between them and montagnards was endemic, although fluctuating in intensity. Conflict has persisted until the present, albeit often in the social/legal realm; the Wandala, with money, literacy and more access to power, often win these contests. At least some Plata believe that Wandala still kidnap young montagnard men and women, taking them over the border far into Nigeria, where they can be sold. It does not matter very

much if this story is true or not; its existence is a testimony to deep, persistent unease, rising to fear and hatred at certain times.

Montagnard traditions state that, in earlier times, the people of Ngolélé and Wandala were all children of one father, and they lived in peace around Ngolélé. In some accounts, the ancestors of the present-day *zelideva* and/or of "les gens d'Agzavrindja" were also part of this prehistoric grouping. There are two accounts of how this peace broke down; one is more common than the other.

In this story, the father of all of these peoples decided that his children should be circumcized and become Muslims, because he saw that Muslims were rulers. His wife chose the good, beautiful children and hid them in caves in the mountains, leaving the ugly, stupid ones at home; she did not want the good ones circumcized. Her husband came and asked where all the good children were. Her wife denied any knowledge of them. Her husband became angry and, after they had argued for some time, told her, "Go to the mountains with the children, but you will have to fear the ones who are left". She left, and the ugly children left at home became Muslim Wandala and hunted their erstwhile brothers. There are variations on the story. In one case it is said that the father hid the children in the mountains. In another, the decision to circumcize the children came after a quarrel between mother and father. This account captures its essential nature.

The less common story was told to me only by two Plata informants. It focuses, not upon the Wandala conversion to Islam, but rather upon the acquisition of horses by some of the people of the group ancestral to the montagnards and the Wandala. Those who bought horses and became familiar with them were able to hunt their "brothers" from horseback, and the others eventually fled into the hills. The important thing is that both of these stories are concerned with the acquisition by only part of a previously undifferentiated population of cultural elements essential to the establishment of a classical Muslim Sudanic state - Islam itself, and cavalry. We may look at these stories almost as metaphors for cultural processes taking place through the Sudanic zone over the last millennium. (It might also be noted here that LEMBEZAT (1950:18) recounts a Podokwo tradition of a common Wandala-Podokwo origin, involving a man with eight sons, four of whom became Wandala and four Podokwo. I have found no further accounts of this).

It is not necessary that these accounts be accepted as literal history, merely as providing an important perspective on the beginnings of Wandala society. The Wandala viewpoint, according to which their society originated in a fusion between incoming peoples and the indigenous Sao and Maya inhabitants of the plains around the Mandara Mountains, is already familiar (MOHAMMADOU 1982; VOSSART 1953). The contribution of the immigrants has usually been emphasized; this is a way for the Wandala to

distance themselves from the mountain peoples and underline their connections with the neighbouring "civilized" states, and, latterly, to confirm themselves as a legitimate Muslim society. This legitimacy has been open to doubt in the past; the view of many of their plains-dwelling neighbours and, more recently, of European colonizers may be summed up in the words of a British colonial official : "The "Mai" of Mandara and the bulk of his people profess to be Mohammedans, but their professions are little more than a veneer of respectability over their original paganism" (TOMLINSON 1916:22).

The stories of Ngolélé offer a view of Wandala origins from the pagan side. These stories emphasize the indigenous nature of Wandala beginnings, in a peaceful community at the northern tip of the Mandara Mountains. There is also agreement between these stories and cultural and linguistic reconstructions for this area.

Wandala and "kirdi"; linguistic and cultural relations

The linguistic relations between Wandala and other languages of the Mandara Mountain borders are well known. The Wandala sub-grouping of Chadic is found over a large area of Cameroun and Nigeria; its extent may be visualized as tripartite, centred on the Keroua/Ngolélé area. One part, including the dialect of Wandala spoken by the Wandala themselves and by the Muraha, Podokwo and (probably) Muktelé extends eastward in the mountains and the plains to beyond Mora.

Another, including the languages Glavda, Laamang (including Hidé, Guduf, Gevoko and Dghwedé, stretches south-southeast, along the eastern edge of the mountains and the Nigeria-Cameroun border, toward Margi-speaking territory. The third part stretches to the north and west, out on to the Chad Plains, and is made up of speakers of the Melgwa dialect of Wandala. (See NEWMAN 1976; LUKAS 1985; BARRETEAU 1988; also BARRETEAU, pers. comm.). This amply demonstrates that the Wandala (and Melgwa) are part of the Mandara Mountain milieu, and that they probably did not originate further to the north, closer to Lake Chad, as their traditions say (MOHAMMADOU 1982). The fact that Keroua appears as a focal point for this grouping is also interesting.

It is rather more difficult to recognize cultural affiliations between the Wandala and montagnards. One reason for this is the lack of availability of ethnographic works on the Wandala; MOHAMMADOU's (1982) book is invaluable, but deals mostly with history and with the structure of the court. FORKL's (1986, pers. comm.) work shows that, while Wandala and montagnard social and political structures are very different, there persists a significant residue of beliefs and practices, which can be correlated with those of the Wandala's "pagan" neighbours, and which include, for example, the former casteing of blacksmiths, and the belief in the spiritual liminality of twins and in the existence of "were-beats", including "were-elephants" (FORLK 1986:9-10).

There also exist data suggesting that cooperation was at least as characteristic of Wandala-montagnard relations as was conflict. The three successive Wandala capitals, at Keroua, Doulo and Mora, were all built with their backs, so to speak, to the mountains, as were other important Wandala centres, such as Memé/Manaouatchi; this may be related to pre-Wandala (Maya) practices in the region (MOHAMMADOU 1982; 85, 220). At all of these sites, there is historical and ethnohistorical evidence for the Wandala use of the nearby mountains as refuges. Glavda and Valé informants at Keroua say that the Wandala would retreat into defensive positions on Keroua mountain when attacked by Bornuans, while retreat from Keroua town, either on to the Keroua inselberg or to the massif around Ngolélé, is attested to by the *Ta'rikh Mai Idris wa ghazawatih*i written at the end of the sixteenth century (IBN FARTUA 1582 (1926) : 36). It appears that, when the capitals at Doulo and Mora were in use, retreat to the hills above Mora was standard (FERRANDI 1928; HALLAM 1977 : 151-153; MOHAMMADOU 1982 : 31-34). DENHAM, CLAPPERTON and OUDNEY (1826) and BARTH (1857) (1965), vol. II : 337) both speak of the mountains being used for defensive purposes by the Wandala and, as late as World War I, the Sultan of the Wandala secreted large caches of sorghum in the mountains to the south of Mora; these caches were used by the Germans in their successful defense of the area (FERRANDI 1928:128).

A defense of this sort could not be prepared without the active cooperation of the neighbouring montagnard groups. In the early colonial period, as today, the Wandala population was much smaller than that of the montagnards and this was probably also true of earlier times. The mountains are ideal defensive positions, as the British and French found, to their cost, during World War I, and it would be for the montagnards to render tactic of "Fortress Mandara" impossible, simply by sabotaging wells as they retreated. Of course, grain storage would be completely impossible without the cooperation of the groups in whose area it is being stored. The Wandala could not simply force their way into the mountains except for transitory raiding purposes.

There is also a great deal of evidence for trade between the Wandala and montagnard peoples. This is not a subject for this particular paper, but it appears as if a trade in mountain products --especially iron and slaves -- for plains goods -- especially dried fish and salt -- was a cornerstone of the economy of the area.

The conclusion that we must come to is simple. Available evidence indicate that the Wandala group is, and was, a product of northern Mandara sociocultural milieu, and that relations between them and their "pagan" neighbours were both close and complex. The montagnard stories of origin at Ngolélé appear to agree more closely with ethnographic and linguistic data than do Wandala (and Melgwa) accounts of immigration from the north and east.

The chronology of mouvement

We now come to a central problem -- were the estrangement between the Wandala and the other people of Ngolélé and the migration of mountain peoples from Ngolélé to the east connected? If we accept both sets of stories, and accept a time depth of ten generations for the montagnard migration to the east, we note that this takes us back to about the time of the Wandala conversion to Islam according to Wandala traditions (see for example MOHAMMADOU 1982). It would be very easy to simply accept this and say that the Wandala conversion and subsequent estrangement from the montagnards caused the ancestors of the Plata, Dumwa and Urza to move east, and to say that this movement took place about 250 years ago.

This reconstruction would be dangerous, and probably wrong. In the first place, chronologies derived from genealogical research are often inaccurate. Again, the montagnards themselves do not connect the two stories. They say that their migration from Ngolélé was caused by a famine there, not that it was caused by the Wandala conversion. Thirdly, the close agreement between the Plata/Dumwa/Urza and Glavda/Valé traditions of the Wandala conversion to Islam strongly indicate that these traditions predate the emigration from Ngolélé.

Finally, and most importantly, the Wandala state itself predates the Wandala conversion to Islam; by the early 18th century, the Wandala were no longer living in a peaceful community at

Ngolélé -- the capital of their state was at Doulo, and they were in the process of extending their suzerainty over much of the area around the Mandara Mountains. The Wandala state had probably been developing for at least 200 years before that, but we know remarkably little about its earlier development. It is interesting to note that the earlier development of the state is intimately connected to the town of Keroua, the first Wandala capital, only a few miles away from Ngolélé.

Wandala state formation and the montagnards

The pre-Islamic existence of the Wandala state does not contradict the stories of the fracture of the community at Ngolélé. We should recall that, according to some traditions, Islam was not the only divisive element adopted by the Wandala; they also acquired horses -- two central ingredients in the recipe for a Sudanic state. It is probably more useful to think of the estrangement between the Wandala and their neighbours as a gradual process, caused by the development of the Wandala state over a considerable period. We do not know how long this development took; it was certainly well under way at the end of the sixteenth century, when IBN FARTUA wrote, and FORKL (1986) talks about state secularization as a process still occurring in the middle of the nineteenth century.

The drive to occupy new territory, the development of class stratification, the opening of trade routes, the secularization of the state -- and, of course, Islam -- would have worked together to increase the profits to be made by exploiting the bodies and the resources of the people marginal to the state. Discrete events, such as the conversion to Islam of the head of state, might have drastically reduced the tolerance for such marginal people -- those who obstinately remained pagan, in this case -- and created large groups of refugees. There is some ethnohistorical evidence that such conflict did follow the conversion of the *tlikse* Boukar Adji in the early 18th century (SEIGNOBOS 1986 : 34). These processes are very probably also connected to events occurring outside the boundaries of the Wandala state, as well. We might expect, for example, that the establishment of the Kanuri Bornuan state west of Lake Chad would have had a great effect upon its smaller neighbour to the south and east.

The descendants of "les gens de Ngolélé" recognize themselves as the descendants of refugees. The woman who did not want her children circumcized hid them in the mountains, and they had to stay in the mountains if they did not want to become slaves of the Wandala. There is no ethnohistorical or archaeological evidence which strongly indicates that the Mandara Mountains have been long occupied at anything like the population densities seen there recently. Few ancient archaeological traces have been recovered from the mountains themselves, and

none that can be definitively assigned to an Early Iron Age period. The material recovered from extensive 1984 archaeological survey generally resembles that found there today and has a distribution grossly covarying with present day ethnic/linguistic distributions (JONES 1985; DAVID and MacEACHERN 1988). Archaeological reconstructions broadly agree with ethnohistorical ones. The present high population densities found in the mountains is a phenomenon of the past few centuries.

Linguistic reconstructions seem to require a greater time depth, but it is probable that immigration by very small groups of people could result in, first, bilingualism and then the rapid adoption of languages spoken by autochthonous peoples (D. BARRETEAU, pers. comm.). If the descendants of such immigrants later became dominant (as the "people of Agzavrindja" have in Uldémé) (DE COLOMBEL 1986), we would have the apparent disagreement between, on the one hand, archaeology and ethnohistory and, on the other, linguistics found today.

Conclusions

The traditions of a number of peoples inhabiting the peripheries of the northern Mandara Mountains tell of the breakup of a prehistoric community situated on the plains around the northwestern tip of those mountains, near what is now the Cameroon/Nigeria border. This community included the ancestors of these people, possibly of a number of other montagnard

groups and also of the Wandala, now Muslim. Accounts indicate that ethnic tensions in this community were much lower than they are today; people "were brothers".

Breakup was brought about by the adoption of certain cultural, social and political traits found in nearby state-level societies by a portion of this community, which became Wandala. People marginal to this segment were either eventually absorbed by it -- as were many of the earlier inhabitants of the plains north of the Mandara massif, including "Sao" (in the most general sense of the term) and Maya -- or were forced to move to the mountains to escape increasing exploitation. These mountains were previously only sparsely inhabited, but immigration, the need for labour to clear fields and build terraces and the necessities of defense increased the population densities to the level seen today. A later migration from Ngolélé by the ancestors of the Plata, Dumwa and Urza and possibly other lineages resulted in much of the ethnic patterning found around Mora today.

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