



# CODESRIA

**12th General Assembly**  
Governing the African Public Sphere

**12e Assemblée générale**  
Administrer l'espace public africain

**12a Assembleia Geral**  
Governar o Espaço Público Africano

ةي عمجل ةي مومعلا ةي ناثلا رشع  
حكم الفضاء العام الإفريقي

**'Up as a Rabbit- Down as a Lion'  
Socio-Economic Determinants of New Idioms of Legitimacy  
and Power in the Public/private Space. Visual Case Stories  
from Uban Adamaoua, Cameroon**

**Lisbet Holtedahl**  
**University of Tromsø**



07-11/12/2008  
Yaoundé, Cameroun

## **Introduction**

Through many years of research on expressions of masculinity and femininity in public and domestic domains in Christian and Muslim milieux in Ngaoundéré, Northern Cameroon, I have developed various tentative hypotheses about transformation processes and dominant dynamics of social change. In this paper I want to focus on visual idioms of masculinity and political power in Muslim urban settings. My argument says that richness (i.e. economic dynamics) overrides the current processes aiming at legitimating democratic political power. I have always used photographs and film as my research tool. Our images allow us, my informants or, rather, my partners and me, to analyze and identify changes in how men have tried and now try to convey, nonverbally, legitimacy of new forms of masculinity and power.

The Danish proverb ‘op som en løve – ned som en skindfelg’ (literally ‘up as a lion – down as a piece of skin (cloth)’) expresses how persons experiencing success in the public sphere may quickly see their success and ambitions destroyed by not foreseen events and attitudes. In the title of this paper I have turned this proverb upside-down in order to express exactly how difficult it often is for people to cope with the complex processes of globalization and transformation and to find and learn the rules that differentiate and legitimize behavior in public and domestic domains in different social contexts. People are often confused about what it is that symbolizes higher and lower positions in social hierarchies, and for some people the construction of legitimization becomes part and parcel of their daily ‘job’. What is ‘up’ and what is ‘down’? In the West you may be seen as a rabbit, in Africa you are perceived of as a lion – and vice versa. Many Europeans experience becoming ‘lions’ when they come to work in Africa: “You have to go to Africa if you want to build castles,” a staff-maker from Paris once said to me. “In France they do not build anything like Versailles anymore”. And – as a modern African industrialist said when he realized that the taxi central understood that an African ordered a limousine. At first the Taxi central did not accept to send the limousine and the industrialist had to repeat many times that he had all kinds of credit cards; that he would pay cash if they wanted: ‘In Paris I am seen as a rabbit – at home I am a lion.’! In Paris a black person might not have access to the same public service as a white? Or, may be this was a too easy assumption? Actually the ‘border’ that was felt and expressed in the taxi-ordering negotiation may have concerned the difference between people coming from France as opposed to people coming from a country outside France? Not until we have done further research will we know the relevance-rule that lay behind the difficulties of getting a limousine; i.e. that was implemented by the taxi central on the phone.

On the background of what has been and is considered visible idioms of power as it is often expressed and interpreted in today's Europe, I will look into and compare the practices of a former Muslim Sultan<sup>1</sup> and a modern Muslim industrialist in Northern Cameroon. Both personalities are considered representatives of Fulbe<sup>2</sup> societies. Both of them have had to handle own multi-ethnic origin in their identity management in the various local settings. They have had to handle local, traditional idioms of masculinity, power and social space, and - at the same time – use strongly Westernized idioms of power and compartmentalization of social space, i.e. new notions about public and domestic domains. They both travel around in Cameroon. They both go to Europe and come back to Cameroon. They both look at television channels from the West. New definitions of domestic/private and public are currently proposed by the Sultan as well as by the industrialist in the local Cameroonian setting. It is my hypothesis that 'playing' with Western idioms is used as a tool by both of them in their efforts to construct a powerful (image of?) self in Cameroon and in Europe. But the ways in which they 'play' are different, as are their successes and failures. Often they do not succeed in their efforts to incorporate new experiences in their own and their audiences' already existing experiences. In this paper I want to take closer look into the practices of my two personalities in what would be some of the public spheres. I may then discover the interface of local and global dynamics, i.e. where to locate the powers of definitions of the games people play (Goffman 19 ?). Then I have also said that my analysis also concerns people's, women's and men's, access to and power in public spheres, and that it varies whether local or global dynamics and rules are in action.

### **Time, space, practice and experience: How do we identify a public sphere?**

As it is said in the call for papers, 'public sphere' is a concept that has been used in many different ways at different times. In this article I define 'public sphere' as a social arena that gathers different kinds of people. People perceive of the arena as a place and a space that *every* member of local and national communities should have access to, share. The access and performances are, however, regulated by rules of behavior and of physical involvement. The notions of nation, of state, of politics of public and democracy are not yet shared by everybody in Northern Cameroon. They are being built little by little. This I why an anthropological examination of a 'public sphere' in Africa must be rooted in description and analysis of some concrete empirical forms of organization of space, social actors and

---

<sup>1</sup> Lamiido (sing.), lamiibe (plur.) in Fulfulde.

<sup>2</sup> Pullo (sing.) fulbe (plur.) is the name of what is called the Fulani (English) and peul (French).

sociability. From there we will discover whether a public sphere reflecting collective and shared notions about common interest and rights do actually exist.

Before I enter into the stories about the two Fulbe characters in northern urban Cameroon through 1982-2008, I need to present my analytical position. As an anthropologist who has worked since 1970 in West Africa<sup>3</sup> and since 1982 in Cameroon, I want to indicate at least three perceptions of time and space that I deal with in this paper: historical time, generational time and my own anthropological time (Rudie 2008). The historical time is the one historians work with, as for instance the history of the Fulbe expansion in Africa: Historians work with documents, remnants, and oral traditions in their efforts to describe societal change through time. Generational time is the more or less shared perceptions, social rules and bodily behaviors of a group of people living together in a certain span of time and in a certain space. These may be inscribed or incorporated (Connerton 1989). Anthropological time is (the anthropologist's) my perception, inscription and incorporation of a specific society as it has evolved through my relationship to it, the moments I have spent with it at various points in time. My perceptions and embodied learning may be partly overlapping with the one of members of the society that is the object of my study. Through time people change their interpretation and perception of their own lives, their own experiences. So does the anthropologist's. There is no correct and true form 'out there'. There are constantly changing experiences and conditions (Rudie 2008).

If we want to understand characteristics of an eventual public sphere in a specific African society we may try to enter the generational time of living people by exploring how they are involved in the public space and what characterizes their sociability there when they enact their everyday practices. The sociability constitutes the rough material for social roles. The anthropologist develops sensitivity towards people's sociability through fieldwork. This sensitivity allows the anthropologist to identify the different social domains and arenas that people 'see' and identify their related behavioral patterns, the roles, and if she wants she may also try to learn how the roles enacted in the public sphere are built into the identity package of persons of the society. When moving around a person is so to speak carrying his/her incorporated cognitive and social skills around like a *cultural formation*. The person may represent a kind of 'unit' in a pluralized (=globalized?) world by being a configuration of

---

<sup>3</sup> I did my first fieldwork in Niger in 1970.

skills, sociability and searching for meaning. Integration and stability consist in the person's trying to find meaning in a changing world by incorporating new experiences in his/her already existing experience structure. Globalization may be seen as a force that may put pressure on local integration. The *unity of the person* and its relative stability may represent obstacles to change. May be a fundamental resistance also lies in the *person's* involvement in space? And may be such involvement in space may be the reason why (local) cultural differences survive in spite of intense cross-border traffic of cultural material (Rudie op. cit.).

In my methodological approach I put much weight on the visual dimension. Visual, nonverbal and oral communications are different from written. They convey different things and release different emotions than written texts (McDougall 2006). The rules that allow us to send and receive visual, nonverbal and oral messages promote other forms of experience and knowledge for people and for researchers than the written dissemination. I have always used drawings, photographs and films as tools in my research in order to discover other people's and my own incorporated knowledge; to identify the social persons and their identity packages in the communities I study (Holtedahl 1993, 1996). I use images and film to try out my own preliminary understanding of filmed social events in people's presence; they will always correct me and make me see new meanings, enactment of new role repertoires and not the least the conditions and constraints that people see (Holtedahl 1973, 1996).

### **Africa and the West/North**

Through many years Northern Cameroon has been my field of study. Key themes concern the question of how concrete forms of power/subordination and richness/poverty are transformed in sociopolitical and socioeconomic processes of change in Cameroon/Africa and in Cameroon's/Africa's relation to the West. It is my impression that the gap between rich and poor in Africa and between Africa and the West grows deeper and deeper. It is important that researchers focus on the power of the local African initiatives and culture vis à vis global dynamics. Where is the interface of global and local in African societies?

Since I am working with the visual dimension and using film I have scrutinized Norwegians' perspective, interpretation and knowledge about Africa through nearly 40 years. It is my opinion that in the ongoing processes of globalization the Western (Norwegian) populations *accumulate ignorance* about Africa all the while they believe that it is the opposite that happens. Television programs give information about Africa but Television programs about

Africa are seldom directed so as to open the windows through which Norwegian people look, their glasses stay ethnocentric (ref.). The enormous information flow easily creates an illusion of learning. But there is a great difference between information and understanding and or knowledge. It follows from this that very many people in the North ignore the concrete initiatives for societal development continuously taken by local people in African countries to promote their collective/individual interests. People in Norway, for instance, do not know the rules of respect and dominance in an African context. They would not be able to read the fights for influence and rights. Their strategies for African development is often built on this lack of knowledge.

Scholars in the North are often caught in the Western<sup>4</sup> ways of framing African societies in spite of their efforts to overcome them. In order to help marginalized people, for instance, many Norwegian social scientists often concentrate their studies on the marginalized groups (Tvedt 199? And 200?). This is a reflection of the culturally defined Norwegian ‘good intentions’, Norwegians want to be ‘helpers’. In addition, even within the Norwegian development activities in Africa, a North-South reciprocity is continuously threatened by the Norwegian administrative rules, bureaucracy, and Norwegians political fight against conservative forces that do not want Africans to come to Norway – or Norwegians to pay for exchange.

In the following pages I describe and analyze the efforts of people in power in a town in Northern Cameroon and I hope that I will succeed in illustrating the importance of ‘studying up’ for a better comprehension of the above mentioned marginalization processes: growing gap between rich and poor and between Africa and the West. By studying powerful people’s performances in public arenas I hope also to discover characteristics of the present forms public spheres. In addition it is my sincere wish that visual anthropology will help us not only to reveal and grasp but also to develop political strategies that may stop or block the ‘invisible’ dynamics that create the gap between rich and poor in Africa and the asymmetrical relation between Africa and the West.

---

<sup>4</sup> Africa’s relationship to the Western colonies has resulted in an incorporation of Western culture in the process of humiliation that has taken place in the recent generations before and after ‘independence’.

### **The Sultan and the industrialist: Different Muslim expressions of power.**

Visiting and living in urban Northern Cameroon through more than 25 years, what have I learned about local people's perception of public spheres? Did I find public spheres in the democratic sense of right to equal participation on regional or national arenas at all? I see the study of the organization of social space and of people's experience-space, as a fruitful entrance to the understanding of globalization processes and of the creation and reproduction of power and subordination. If we identify the interface of local (African) and global dynamics, here Northern, we also grasp local people's propositions and solutions to local (and may be global?) problems but also their opportunities. I will now introduce to you two important personalities to illustrate this point. The one, the Sultan, Lamiido<sup>5</sup> Issa Maigari, was an important person, politically and judicially, for the inhabitants of urban, i.e. Ngaoundéré, and rural Adamaoua during his 25 years' reign, 1970-1995. He is seen as a *Pullo* leader. His mother, however, is Mbum and his father was the former *Pullo* Sultan, whose mother was also a Mbum. Al hajji Jawri<sup>6</sup> is an important Muslim industrialist living in today's Ngaoundéré. He was a poor herdsman, shoemaker, smith and tailor as young. Later he became a bus-driver, owned a transport company and he is since the beginning of the 1980ies an important economic, political and social actor not only in Ngaoundéré and Adamaoua and in the whole North of Cameroon but also at the level of the nation. He is a member of the 'bureau politique' of the President's party, RDPC<sup>7</sup>, in Cameroon. He says his father is a *Pullo* and that he is himself a *Pullo*. His father came, however, from a mixed *Njamdji*<sup>8</sup>-*Fulbe* village. His mother came from Chad and belonged to one of the ethnic groups there. He grew up in Mbumdjeere, the *Mbum* quarter of Ngaoundéré. Most of his friends from that time are *Mbum* or *Hausa* (from the neighbouring quarter). I have spent altogether several years on the carpets in the reception halls (*jawleerji*<sup>9</sup>) of the two powerful personalities, i.e. in what I would call *their* public space. The question is to what extent this is a *public sphere* as defined above. I have taken many photographs and filmed their everyday activities on their personal public reception arena in their palaces respectively. So what I am going to talk about I am able to show you in my rushes.

---

<sup>5</sup> *Lamiido* (sing.), *lamiibe* (plur.) Fulfulde for leader, king or sultan.

<sup>6</sup> *Al Hajji*, (origin, Haj, Arab) title attributed by all Muslims to men having travelled on pilgrimage to Mecca.

<sup>7</sup> Rassemblements démocratiques des populations du Cameroun.

<sup>8</sup> *Njamdji* is the name of a minor ethnic group very much stigmatized by the *Fulbe*.

<sup>9</sup> Singular, *Jawleeru*, local *fulfulde* term.

I have launched the hypothesis that economic dynamics override other dynamics, i.e. for instance local cultural dynamics, as to the determination of new behavioral forms in what I would call one of the local public spheres in Ngaoundéré (I think that we will have to say that there are several public spheres<sup>10</sup>). If I am right this means that people who do not have economic means have not much to say in the negotiations and definitions of the new rules of a progressively emerging public sphere. Their propositions are eventually rejected. The part of your social identity that is displayed in a one of these public arenas is in this way governed or directed by others, those who have money and power. It is *their* propositions as to what legitimizes new local public behavioral skills that will rule. Since economic dynamics represent a social field of global scale (Grønhaug 1982, Barth 19 ?, Bourdieu ? Rudie), it also implies that we have to do not only with Cameroonian, but also with African and Western, i.e. global, economics.

I have come to this hypothesis by comparing tediously the life careers of these two characters and their inscribed and incorporated behavior in public spheres mainly in Ngaoundéré but also in Yaoundé and in France (the Sultan and Al Hajji) and Norway (the Sultan).

I found many resemblances and differences in their behavior as Muslim men in power. These variations lead me to dig deeper into their respective stories about their own lives; their behaviors through time as they have been performed in my presence i.e. in *their public space*; into the historic past of the *Fulbe* people and their emergence as a hybrid Muslim group with what for many people could be said to be a somewhat superficial *Fulbe* identity in Ngaoundéré and Northern Cameroon (Issa ?, Adama?, Njeuma ?, Hamadou ?, Djingui ?, Burnham ?); and into my own inscribed and incorporated behavior as it unfolded on their carpets through 25 years and as it is revealed in the film rushes. I remembered for instance that Lamiido Issa Maigari allowed me not only to film his secluded his wives<sup>11</sup>, but also his concubines<sup>12</sup> and female servants<sup>13</sup>. He also allowed public screenings in Ngaoundéré, on local people's television, on BBC and Scandinavian televisions, of images of his four secluded wives in what I see as his efforts to stay in power as a political leader. He actively

---

<sup>10</sup> Groups that are not Muslim often organize *their public social space* in fundamentally different ways from the Muslim populations. In the Joli Soir quarter of Ngaoundéré in 1982 I found that nearly every aspect of personal everyday life was exposed in the street: washing the nearly naked body, dishes, clothes, eating, quarrelling, flirting, discussions, crises etc. (Eidheim 1972). In the Muslim quarters people only passed through the streets or they were sitting (Waage 2003) talking. Everything else happened behind the walls.

<sup>11</sup> Debbo teaado (sing.), rewbe teaabe (plur.) in Fulfulde.

<sup>12</sup> Sullaado (sing.), sullaabe (plur.) in fulfulde.

<sup>13</sup> Kaado (sing.), horbe (plur.) in Fulfulde.

tried to use the interest from the outside world (the global public sphere?) for himself and his family to compensate for what he experienced as a progressive loss of power locally. The around ten year younger industrialist, Al Hajji Jawri, would never allow anybody from the local or global society (public sphere ?) to see photographs or film images of his 4 wives even less on an international television channel. I think that one has to look into the experiences and space of each of them and into the different economic positions of the two personalities, if one wants to understand their different strategies. Why the one, a traditional political and religious leader, breaks the local Muslim rules of proper behavior in the society and the other – the innovator and industrialist – sticks to them. To understand this difference we need to look into the consequences of literacy<sup>14</sup> but also of richness in the Muslim community of Ngaoundéré. Global and local economic dynamics are decisive for local change in the generational time and space orientation in a modern local Muslim society in Northern<sup>15</sup> Cameroon, but they are only one of many determinants. It may be the one of the multiple determinants that hampers equity in access to new public realms. The consequences of new forms of richness may be, in the anthropological perspective, such as to encourage rich persons to create unity and balance in his/her local image of self, his/her own identity, by insisting on expressing traditional male idioms of power, not the new ones and vice versa for the traditional Sultan.

### **The Wodaabe and the Mbororo: Pastoral Fulbe's gendered space.**

In order to scrutinize 'traditional' Fulbe expression of gender and space in the Borno (Northern Nigeria and Eastern Niger) and Northern Cameroon regions I will pay a short visit to Wodaabe and Mbororo families with whom I have lived through my life as anthropologist. In 1970 I lived with and filmed a *Wodaado* family in Eastern Niger. My closest collaborator and friend was a **Hanagamba**<sup>16</sup> man, Gorjo Bii Riima. He is of my age, born around 1946, and in 1970 he was helping the local French expatriates who built wells in the villages in the area. He helped me learning the *Hausa* language, lingua franca in the area, and in the establishment of contacts with the citizens of Mainé Soroa and the pastoral populations in the area (Holtedahl 1973, 2001 and 2003). Since 2002 I have been living every year for a week in his camp with his family. From 1982 to today I have been 'part of' a *Mbororo* family in

---

<sup>14</sup> "The Consequences of Literacy", Goody 1968.

<sup>15</sup> There are very important Diasporas in Douala and Yaoundé and other cities in Southern, Central, Western and Eastern Cameroon.

<sup>16</sup> Subgroup of the Wodaabe.

Cameroon, the relatives and children of Malam Oumarou Nduudi<sup>17</sup>. Most of the family lives in sedentary camps in the bush. But some young members are living in urban Garoua and Ngaoundéré. Both families have the same extremely modest economic situation, surviving with few cattle, some agriculture, and sale of milk, butter and traditional medicine. From my own observations and involvement in their lives, from anthropological texts (Dupire, Stenning, Verecke, Djingui, Riesman, Boutrais) and film (Bovin, Ahmadou, ?, Høltedahl 1997) I learned a gender specific organization of experience, behavior and space among these pastoral *Fulbe*: The *Wodaabe* and the *Mbororo* organize their camps in a female space and a male space. All domestic work and the social relations of men and women are differentiated along gender lines and expressed in gendered sociability, in various social gatherings and also in public spheres. Men's space is centralized; women's is reticulated, compartmentalized. Men stay on their side, women on theirs. There are neither tents nor houses, but every adult woman has a fireplace and her own cooking and milking equipment where she stays when she is in the camp. Men are sitting on the opposite side of the camp, i.e. of the calf-rope. All behavior, including bodily and physical, of all members and visitors is regulated very strictly on the basis of gender. After a while one notices an invisible architecture so to speak, organizing the totally open space in which they all live. Women are moving around differently from men, they relate differently to cows and calves. If men are present the women have to withdraw. Women communicate with children and female relatives in *their public space* and the men in *their public space*. Men's and women's experience and space are different in numbers, size and structure. They are conditioned by a certain coordination of body and the materiality of space (women: water and milking; men: the movements and reproduction of herds) and the sociability of groups. This has been described in numerous texts and films (jfr.op.sit.). In these communities women work and work (food, clothes, water, children, donkeys) and have a lot of obligations as long as they are physically healthy. Husbands and male relatives are authorities around whom women and children circulate. Sons progressively get the responsibility for the herd and agriculture. Men take the important decisions like when to move and where to move. Men represent the families in relations to decisions about access to wells, local authorities, veterinarians, etc. Recently Gorjo has become a representative of the *Wodaabe* group to which he belongs at the local municipality council. Important is that, apart from that, through 40 years there has been very little change in the lives. The incorporated generational behavioral practices and the gendered person as

---

<sup>17</sup> The late father Henri Bocquené who worked among the Mbororos of Eastern Adamaoua introduced me to him when I started fieldwork in Cameroon.

cultural formation have been transferred through two generations of children. These families are relating to the local and regional communities; to the markets and other people at the wells like before. What I want to do here is to follow up on the continuities as they may be expressed in generational performances and person as cultural formation by the now sedentary *Fulbeized* urban groups (Schultz, Van Santen) of Northern Cameroon, by visiting two milieux in Ngaoundéré, Adamaoua.

### **The Fulbe conquerors and the conquered.**

Around two hundred years ago the first pastoral *Fulbe* arrived in Northern Cameroon in search of new grazing grounds. They came originally from Mali, Macena. At that time they were living like the Mbororo and Wodaabe do today. But, some of them had converted to Islam when staying in the Muslim Borno Empire headed by the Kanuri people and they led a religious war, Jihad, conquered local populations and founded sultanates in Northern Cameroon (Cfr. Ousmane dan Fodio, Eldridge etc.) Sultanates characterized by centralized political leadership based on slavery and physical violence and strict social hierarchies were established through the process. Local sedentary groups were assimilated into what is described as *Fulbe* dominated Muslim empires in very violent ways. In Ngaoundéré especially the sedentary *Mbum*, *Ndii* and the *Gbaya* populations were concerned. They were assimilated by force and/or very subtle political diplomacy, the *Mbum*, into the sultanates with varying responsibilities (slaves, servants, soldiers, tax collectors etc.). They *Mbum* experienced strong humiliations, loss of prestige and recognition with its special consequences as to the reproduction of generational behavior and the transformation of persons as a cultural formation. The *Gbaya*, *Ndii* and especially the *Mbum* incorporated the totally changed political environment into new attitudes and images of self. Especially the *Mbum* lost self respect (Boutrais, Eldridge). These were even manifested demographically therein that entire villages' birth rate went down, some of them died out (Dibi). In the modern Cameroonian public arenas like in the Evangelical Lutheran Church, you will observe the expression of these differently inscribed and incorporated *Gbaya* and *Ndii*<sup>18</sup> experiences and cultural performances in the way they currently fight against each other about influence (Lode, Drønen, Gullestad). A lot of the *Mbum* people who were the originally the dominant population in Ngaoundéré (Gondolo 196?) have 'become' *Fulbe* today. It is said that the Fulbe did not use of violence when the *Mbum* population was incorporated politically as

---

<sup>18</sup> Through the Protestant mission schools the literacy level of the *Gbaya* and *Ndii* grew from 1924 whereas the *Mbum* did not convert to Christianity and only lately did they convert to Islam.

sunordinates in the Fulbe sultanate of Ngaoundéré. The present Bellaka (Cfr. Bellaka SawMbum of Nganha) says that this relies in the very special traditions of the *Mbum*. In spite of their being organized in a centralized political kingdom, they did not defend themselves because ('the incorporated behavior of', my additions) the *Mbum* towards strangers was expressed in hospitality. The *Mbum* who stayed *Mbum* in Ngaoundéré have lost power progressively with the diminishing of the power of the Sultanate. After the multiparty elections in 1992 they have, however, become more visible as a people and cultural tradition. This story, or history, indicates interethnic behavioral practices, traditions and dynamics in what would be called 'former public arenas' of Adamaoua.

The new sultanate of Ngaoundéré<sup>19</sup>, formerly the centre of the *Mbum* kingdom with its *Bellaka*<sup>20</sup>, incorporated especially the *Mbum* political traditions (a government with ministers responsible for the politics, health, agriculture, magic, etc) all the while the *Mbum* were violently oppressed. The architecture, the building techniques, the crafts; the court, the actors, the ministers of the *Fulbe* sultanate in Ngaoundéré, all represent continuity of a gendered *Mbum* organization of sociability and space (Tegomoh, Agège, Faro, Hino, Holtedahl 1993, 1996). *But* the Sultan is now seen as a *Pullo*, and descent is assured in the male line. The Sultan's children with his legitimate wives, *rewbe teabe*, are *Fulbe* whether his wives are *Mbum*, *Hausa*, *Kanuri* or *Fulbe*. Do we see any continuity of the pastoral *Fulbe*'s way of life in the Sultan's experience, space and as a person as a cultural formation? And what does the Cameroonian state presently do to all this?

Spørgsmål om aggression –fulbere- og diplomati – mbumere NBNB

### **Men's and women's space in the Sultan's palace.**

The palace is organized in many separate spaces by high walls. You enter through several entrance halls before you arrive at the reception hall of the *Lamiido*. Behind the Sultan's 'public house' you find his private house, his horse house, his equipment house (musical instruments etc. carpets, pillows, umbrellas og vifter (?) etc.). In the innermost quarters you find the Sultan's male servants, his mother, his female servants, concubines and wives. The male servants, *maccube*<sup>21</sup>, must always kneel deeply in front of the Sultan. They may not sit

---

<sup>19</sup> *Ngaoundéré* is *Mbum*: *ngaou* means mountain, *ndere*, navel.

<sup>20</sup> *Mbum* title for centralized political leadership.

<sup>21</sup> *Maccudo* (sing.) *Fulfulde* for male slave.

on the Sultan's carpet. The female slaves may not approach the Sultan in public; they also always have to lay down if they address the Sultan. At the same time, only the servants are allowed to move around the whole palace, in and out of all the houses and courts. They represent the connection between the secluded wives and the Sultan and the world. The Sultan's power and authority is expressed in the others', servants, 'slaves', bodily attitudes: they do not look at him when talking, they are on their knees, i.e. distance. When he is 'out', *owurti*<sup>22</sup>, i.e. publicly accessible in his reception house, he is constantly shifting place. His throne is mobile and it is a kind of protection that people who visit him never know where he will be sitting today. His ministers are also on their knees when addressing him. The Sultan's space is visualized in the clear bodily language used by all the people of the palace.

Compared to the *Wodaabe* and *Mbororo* women, the Sultan's wives are even more limited in their space. They only see children, female relatives and friends. In their isolated houses they negotiate female friendship and Fulbe family relationships and they confirm and reproduce their higher rank as *Fulbe* women towards the female and male *Mbum* servants. They cannot possibly go anywhere without the Sultan's permission. Some of his prestige in Ngaoundéré and Adamaoua society lies so to speak in invisibility of his four wives. The 'invisible walls' of the pastoral *Fulbe*'s organization of space are 'reproduced' (continuity?) as physical walls around and within which we find a transformed gendered generational performance. Members of the *Mbum* community, the male and female servants, assure as subordinates to the *Fulbe* (of hybrid origin) the survival of total seclusion of the *Fulbe* wives by building and constantly rehabilitating the constructions of the palace and as messengers that connect the wives to the outer world<sup>23</sup>.

But, times were changing. As a *white* woman I was allowed to sit *on the sofa* next to the Sultan when he received people in his reception house. My eyes were at the same level as his! A total anomaly in the context of the Muslim Fulbe society of Ngaoundere. This would only be possible for people who were *not* his subordinates from the Adamaoua province, and for his new superiors: generals of the army, the governor, the Catholic archbishop, ministers etc. As a white woman I was a total stranger without local a gendered identity that could fit into the rules of the Sultan's public space.

---

<sup>22</sup> From *wurtugo*, Fulfulde: to come out.

<sup>23</sup> Arab urban gender traditions may also have influenced through Islam, see Abu Lugod, Geerts etc..

### **Continuity and change in Fulbe political leadership: a Rabbit or a lion?**

Western education came late to the North of Cameroon, and Ahidjo<sup>24</sup>, himself a *Pullo* from the North, had difficulties developing the uneducated Muslim North and now also Christian North<sup>25</sup> in the 1960ies and 1979ies (Fah, Eldridge ). The local Sultans of the North had been the political anchors of the colonizers, German and French, and Ahidjo continued to rely on them for political purposes. He also strengthened the position of the Al Hajjis of the North; the rich Muslim entrepreneurs received huge loans from the Cameroonian state, loans that they never paid back. But gradually a state apparatus was built in the North and the position of the Sultans was threatened (Sadou Dauda 2000).

Since 1982, Cameroon got a new president, Paul Biya, a Catholic from the Centre. More and more bureaucrats from the South worked in the urban parts of the North. In 1991-1992I I collaborated closely with the Sultan of Adamaoua and the people in his palace through several months, when I shot the film “The Sultan’s Burden” (Holtedahl 1993). It was during the preparations for the first multiparty presidential elections in Cameroon; a period of serious turmoil and rebellion especially in the North of Cameroon (Holtedahl 1993, Burnham...). The new and young processes of democratization led to a sharpening of regional ethnic dichotomization. The *Mbum* population threatened the Lamidate. The members of the court, *faada*<sup>26</sup>, shook their swords. The following year the palace was put on fire and all the entrance halls burned down. One had the feeling that the state’s efforts for control of the North may have been rooted in a divide and reign policy towards the different groups of the North. But as I have described, many populations had been subjugated for a long time.

At that time the *Fulfulde* language was only spoken in the Sultan’s *jawleeru*, i.e. in the Sultan’s public space. This space still framed/governed an important part of the behaviors in the new public sphere in Ngaoundéré town. The Sultan received generals and ministers; vice-chancellors and provincial delegués; Protestants and Catholics; Ghaya and Ndiï peasants, pastoral *Fulbe*, sedentarized *Fulbe* and urban Fulbe citizens; women and men. Behind the walls of the palace the dominant language was *Mbum*. The Sultan’s mother, originally a *sullado* of the Sultan’s father, only spoke *Mbum*. In this sultanate, in my meetings with the ‘slaves’, servants and craftsmen, I found that men and women expressed suffering and

---

<sup>24</sup> Cameroon’s first president, a *Pullo* from Garoua.

<sup>25</sup> Since 1920ies American and Norwegian protestant missionaries started their work in Adamaoua. The French Catholic Mission was first established in the 190ies.

<sup>26</sup> Faada (sing.) Fulfulde, for court or government.

hopelessness, they were complaining. They said they suffered a double oppression, first the one of the conquering *Fulbe*, then the consequences of the Sultan's recent loss of power in the processes of societal change. Since Cameroonian independence most Sultanates of Northern Cameroon had declined. Only the famous Lamiido de Rey Bouba had resisted and stayed a state in the state up till recently (Eldridge).

The development of the Cameroonian state had strongly contributed to this reduction of the Sultan's power. This fall of the Sultan's prestige and power was also progressively played out at various ceremonies taking place in front of the Governor's buildings, Place de l'indépendance, in town. The ceremonies organized by the administrators expressed visually a marginalization of the Sultan and his followers. The ministers, governor and provincial délégués, préfets and sous-préfets, vice-chancellor and heads of police and army were sitting in the middle on the first bench of the tribune whereas the Sultan sat on his traditional throne surrounded by his servants far out on the side. Not to be in the center of men removes the power of a *Fulbe* Sultan. The sayings of the Minister of Interior did not help either: "We have to eliminate traditional ways of behaving in order to develop our country!" (Holtedahl 1993).

The governor as well as the leaders of the army was now the Sultan's superiors. The Sultan had become an employee of the state and received a monthly salary, around 300.000 Cfa. He was no longer allowed to receive a fixed part of the harvest from the peasants; no slaves, no tax. The former idioms of the master-slave relationship were no longer as relevant for communication, negotiation and dissemination on the new arenas of the municipality, province and state, as they had been. It is here, on the new arenas that people fight for the acceptance of new criteria for social rank. These arenas are totally dominated by men. Women who are present are singers, dancers and audience.

Who may touch the Sultan's carpet is less certain than before. Time has for instance become an 'object' of negotiation of relative power. Once, when the Sultan went to the local airport to receive the Minister of interior, he had to wait for five hours before the minister arrived. All the singers, dancers, local people saw him sitting there all that time, waiting; he who is normally always making people wait. So, like many other citizens, the Sultan had to fight to keep his position through continuous negotiations about how idioms of superior/subordinate, big/small have to be conveyed. Little help is to be found in the black limousine that takes him to the airport.

### **Decline of a Fulbe regime?**

One day I was filming in the palace one of the Sultan's scalds, (griots, *bambaabe*<sup>27</sup>), screamed to me and the camera "Lamiido Issa Maigari is stingy! He only offers beans while he himself eats chickens! In former times he offered clothes, food, horses, everything we needed. Now, we only get the crumbs that the tourists give to us". Not many servants heard what he said, but he said it to my camera! A new kind of arena; may be a frightening one?

In the palace –as it was the case in the Middle Ages in Europe: news circulates quickly. The Sultan had since long started directing the film. This was a necessary consequence of my wish to have him teach me his perceptions, his space. Suddenly, shortly after this, I found him on one of his many thrones. The camera was running, and the Sultan was explaining tediously to his whole court and my camera why one can not accuse him of being stingy!

The Sultan profited from the fact that he and I collaborated on the production of a film to negotiate with his servants and scalds how his superiority and their subordination must be expressed and understood. To me he said that the black man's does not have magic that is as strong as the white man's. He also told me that he received more respect from white people than from his black subordinates and servants. This was why, he told me, he wanted so much to go to *lesdi nasaara*<sup>28</sup>, the white man's land.

### **A lion's dream.**

When Lamiido Issa Maigari later on visited Norway I got the opportunity to discover what happens when different ways of organizing experience and social space, Norwegian and Cameroonian (or Fulbe and Norwegian?) meet or are confronted with each other, i.e. the Sultan's and the people of my University, the missionaries in Stavanger, etc. In the arenas where these different repertoires and skills meet we may find the interface of global and local dynamics. What is the scale of a Muslim Fulbe Sultan's person as cultural formation? Can he use his competence and skills in Norway? To what extent do Norwegian norms decide how things must be done? When I planned to invite Sultan Issa Maigari to universities in Norway and invited colleagues whose students had been well received by Sultan Issa Maigari when they did fieldwork in Adamaoua, they told me, that this was not a proper academic initiative but a touristic event. In the Norwegian academic field of African studies, where academics

---

<sup>27</sup> Griot, French, Bambaado (sing.) in Fulfulde means for scald.

<sup>28</sup> Lesdi, earth and nasaara, white man, in Fulfulde.

consider themselves as competent actors on the international arena (public sphere?), their reaction revealed a (very) Norwegian (male?) space that organized Sultans as belonging to the tourist category. Academics do not invite informants/research partners from the field to the academy either. The Director of the Norwegian Research Council in Oslo<sup>29</sup>, however, were interested in the-use-of-film-in-research-project about the Sultan and accepted to organize a workshop for staff in the Research Council, Staff from the University of Oslo, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Development Cooperation. “The Sultans Burden” was screened for everybody, and the Sultan in turban and gandura<sup>30</sup> together with his Walkiiri<sup>31</sup> and Minister of Cultural Affairs. Upon question from the Norwegian audience about his experience from his stay in Norway, he replied surprisingly, that he actually felt like a ‘small man’. Since he was born there had always been very many Norwegians (missionaries) in Ngaoundéré. He grew up with him he told. His grand father gave land to the missionaries. He had imagined that he would meet many Cameroonians in Norway. But now he had been told that there were only 8 Cameroonians in whole Norway. This must be an expression of the white man’s magic! Since Norwegians always had behaved respectfully towards him in Ngaoundéré, he thought Norwegians *in* Norway also would behave respectfully towards him. The fact that there was only a small number of Cameroonians in Norway expressed, he said, a serious lack of hospitality towards Cameroonians which he felt like a lack of respect for him and his forefathers. The elephant king<sup>32</sup> had become a mouse. When the Sultan visited the University of Tromsø in Northern, marginal Norway, students and staff tried to find out how to behave towards an African Sultan. It was not easy. But the Sultan appeared more relaxed and did not seem to feel as hurt as in Oslo. Should we consider this event, the Sultan’s visit in Norway, an event in an African public sphere?

The patterns of behavioral rules are most often ‘on the move’, but at any given moment in time they define people’s opportunities. I want to desc Fieldwork

By learning people’s practices and knowing their experiences

The different roots of Power.

This was played out on the public arenas of the town.

---

<sup>29</sup> The Norwegian capital.

<sup>30</sup> Gandura, Fulfulde for male kaftan.

<sup>31</sup> Walkiiri, Hausa and Fulfulde for Minister of international affairs.

<sup>32</sup> Sarkin njiwa: the elephant king (sarki, Hausa for king, njiwa, Fulfulde for elephant). The scalds always scream “Sarkin njiwa! Sarkin Adamaoua!” to praise the Lamiido in Ngaoundéré. This is part of the important performances confirming the importance and power of the Sultan of Adamaoua.

**Bibliography:**

Goody: “the Consequences of Literacy..?” in History and Society (?) 1968