

Full Length Research Paper

# **LIKODA LI-MBOG [Native horizons: Authority relations and the management of crises among the Basaa people of South-western Cameroon]**

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Accepted 24 June, 2013

The title of this paper is rightly “*Likoda Li-Mbog*.” It is a summary of a finished Ph. D. thesis in Systems Analysis. In the thesis, we examine the events of power and authority relations and the various ways in which they articulate an underlying epistemology and world-view. Specifically, the problem area relates to aspects of social control which arise from the grip of a world-view on a people’s behaviour. The purview – in terms of a view of society – of our study is a system with a specifiable mode of organisation based on yet another at once implicit and explicit. “*Mbog*”, to name the system, permeates every aspect of Basaa life. As a system of meanings, it amounts to a complete view of the world – ways in which a people perceive their shared reality. We, for the case of the Basaa people, have tried to show an organic relationship between the manner in which a people are organised politically, and a system of knowledge, itself an adumbration of a world-view that we have named.

**Key words:** World-views, knowledge systems, social control, authority relations, the tribal assembly.

## INTRODUCTION

This study is of the system of authority of the Basaa people. The puzzle is about the relationship between a world-view and the socio-political structure and relations among a people. In specific terms, among the Basaa people, we named *mbog* as the *world-view* of the Basaa people. The question is to fathom the extent to which this world-view underpins social organisation in the specific domains of political order and power relations. The question we are considering is that of *mbog* as the steering component of the Basaa people, of *mbog* in the manner in which it grips interpersonal relationships and interaction among a people, of the characterisation that *mbog* gives to the group and the very fact of definition that *mbog* gives to being a group.

In terms of an analysis of intentional acts, we in this study have tried to reconstitute the totality of meaning

embodied in “*mbog*.” The crucial question which enchain our consideration was how this culturally integrating totality could be distilled from the various “objectifications” of the Basaa world, and how one could give a theoretical account of it. In other words, the question is one of interpreting smaller scale cultural phenomena as components of a *Weltanschauung*.

### Statement of the problem

The title of this study is rightly “*Likoda li-Mbog*.” The longer title, “Native Horizons: Authority Relations and the Management of Crises among the Basaa People of Southwestern Cameroon” has been volunteered for its direct suggestiveness of a problem area of research,

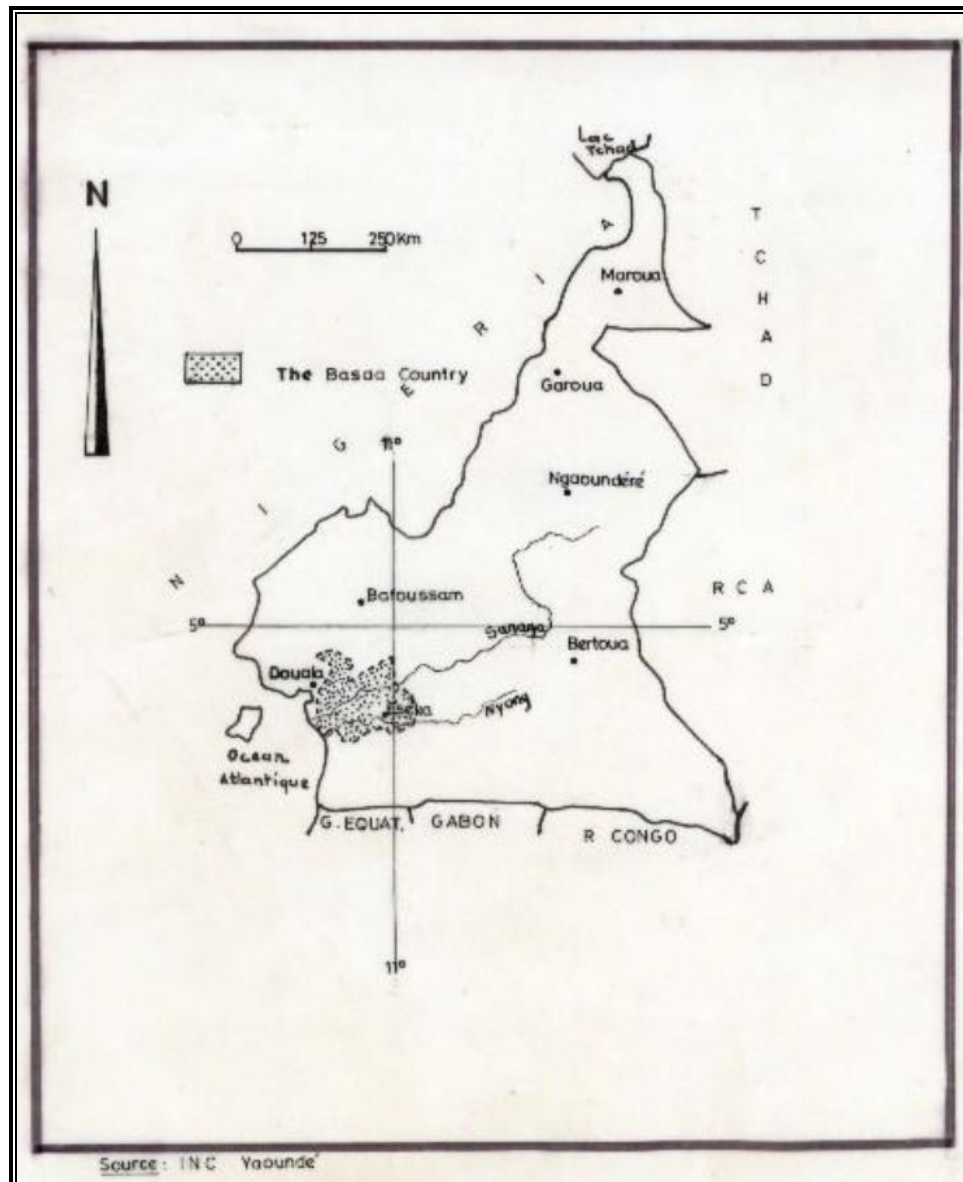


Figure 1. The situation of Basaa land in the modern Republic of Cameroon.

namely, the area of world-views and socio-political structure and relations (Figures 1-3).

The term "world-view" has been calqued from the German word "Weltanschauung." "Welt" is the German word for "world" and "Anschauung" is the German word for "view" or "outlook." Ordinarily, the term "Weltanschauung" denotes a comprehensive set of opinions, seen as an organic unity, about the world as the medium and exercise of human existence.

For any named group the "Weltanschauung" serves as a framework for generating various dimensions of human

perception and experience like knowledge, politics, economics, religion, culture, science, and ethics. It may be considered as comprising a number of basic beliefs which are philosophically equivalent to the axioms of the world-view considered as a logical theory. These basic beliefs cannot, by definition, be proven [in the logical sense] within the world-view precisely because they are axioms, and are typically argued *from* rather than argued *for*. We have mostly used the term to refer to the framework of ideas and beliefs through which a people interpret the world and interact with it.

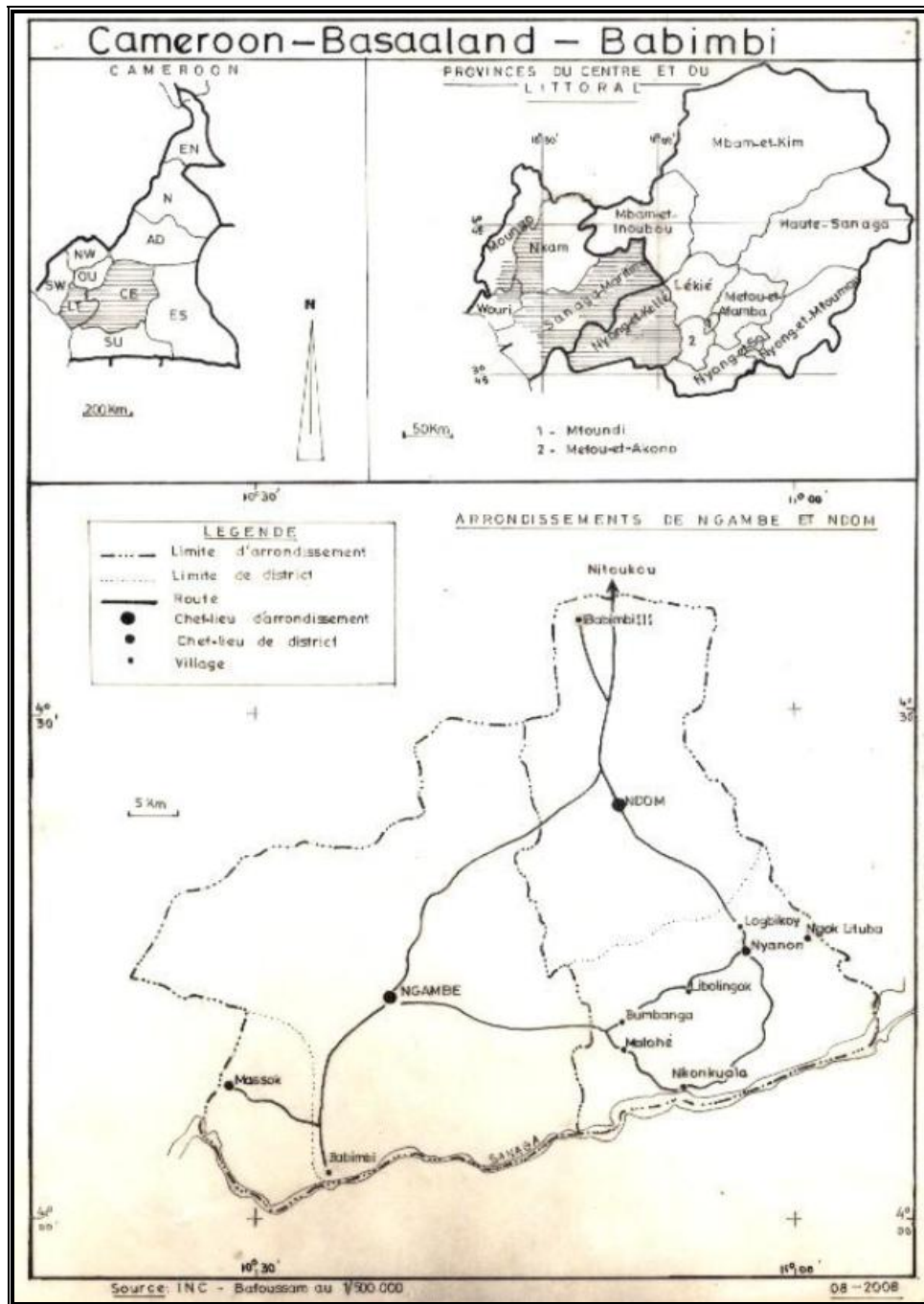


Figure 2. The two main districts of modern Cameroon with the greatest concentration of the Basaa people.

Sometimes we have meant the posture of a people. The *Weltanschauung* of a people originates from the unique world experience of the latter, from their experience in their existence over several millennia. It emerges as holistic representations of the wide world perception.

The term "*likoda*" of the title is derived from the Basaa verb "*kod*" [to assemble]. This verb would be used in reference to things which are assembled, or parts of a thing which are fitted together to give a whole.

The range and variety of things to which the term

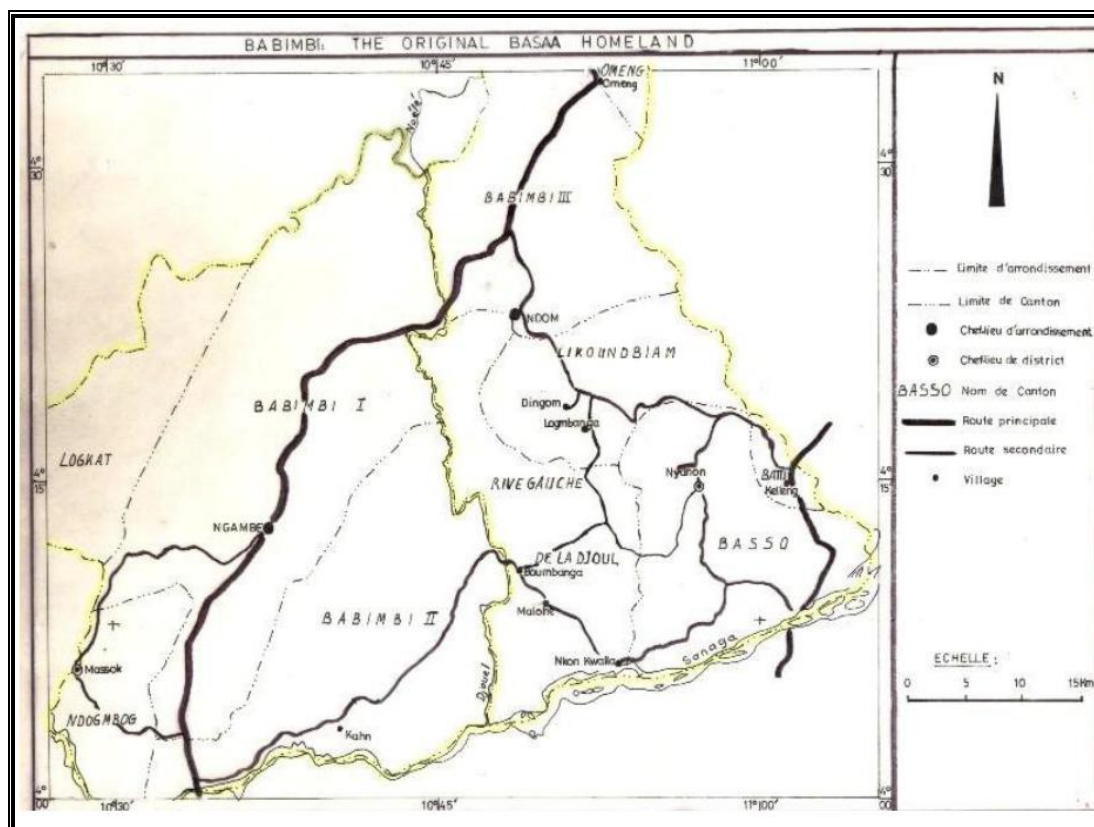


Figure 3. Babimbi: The purported cradle of the Basaa people of Cameroon.

“*mbog*” may allude make it a very challenging proposal to volunteer a brief rendering into English.

Let us consider some mechanical device: the clock for instance. The clock is supposed to serve to tell time. About time, there is the idea of lasting periods and of occurrences. Mini seconds, seconds, minutes, hours, days, months and so on denote periods of time as we live on. Of the working of the clock, we know we can measure time as it happens. The clock is a mechanical assemblage that works; the mechanical thing enables the reading off of time. By itself the clock is just some contraption. Time which arises can be read off and the reading or the measurement of time makes sense to the reader because there is an implicitly held meaning affecting the clock – what it is, what it is meant for or how it work. This meaning is not another mechanical device. It does not have any physical component. But the event of the clock, it would seem, cannot be without it. So, as well as we may have a tangible thing – a mechanical assemblage meant to work in a certain manner and which works – we know to be a clock, it would not be one without what a clock is known to be. Two things we have here: a mechanical assemblage for an intended purpose

and a shared understanding of what it is meant for. Transposing our analogy to the world of humans, we would have individuals who occur in a given space, the groups they form, how they get to continue to exist as ongoing groups. People existing in the same space may not be a group. For a group to be, in addition to individuals, we expect a shared idea of *groupness*. *Mbog* as we understand it would be individuals who can be thought of as existing as a group and a shared world in ideational terms which enable meaningful interaction. In this study, we are concerned with a group and the processes out of which it continues to be – a group [*mbog*] and processes of *groupness* [*mbog*].

To relate the identity of the Basaa people we stated notable events in Basaa history and everyday life and opine a consequent folk image which is passed on from the value system from generation to generation. The content of the folk image, the folk image itself and the process of its transmission from generation to generation would be the thing we have designated as “*mbog*” among the Basaa people. In this consideration it transpires that “*mbog*” would be identity securing. In our usage the term “*mbog*” mostly alludes to an identity-securing entity, and

to a moral system. Or else it designates the Basaa conception of the nature of things and Basaa standards in general: a system of knowledge, the epistemology which underpins the posture of the Basaa man. In the term "*likoda li-mbog*" the meaning of the term "*mbog*" we propose is "of people."

In a sense, the term "*likoda li-mbog*" can be rendered as "the event of solidarity among a group," "an existence together *determined* by a shared world-view." *Likoda li-mbog* = assembling of people – the term "people" meaning individuals in an existence together on the basis of which is a system of values, norms, mores and *usii*, and perhaps a history they share. "*Mbog Basaa*" for instance, which has been rendered as the "Basaa Nation," suggests a people, and the system of values, norms, mores and *usii* they share. As we use the term [*likoda li-mbog*] in this study, it encompasses the idea of *keeping in place together* as when a family or some other social entity exists as one.

We also and especially related the term to a specifiable institution, namely, that of the custom of meetings which arise whenever a Basaa group has to deal with a crisis or a turning point in the life of an individual or in the condition of the group.

A birth, a naming ceremony, a circumcision or puberty rite, a marriage, the initiation of an individual into some lore, death – each of these events implies for every member of a group, an acquisition or ritual change of status, and implies the coming into being or changes of relationships and attendant relations. Other events which would have similar effects are a felony and the flouting of a tribal law. The meaning of the term "crisis" which gripped the discussions of this study is that which relates to events in the basic transitions in the life cycle of an individual, and breaches of the tribal law, in the manner in which they affect the existing lot of relationships and relations in a given group. The tribal assembly – let us use this term – is an event of social structure which enables a group to manage flux in the case of a crisis. *Likoda li-mbog* among the Basaa people would be an archetype.

### The basic question

We would restate the problem of our study, namely, that of the relationship between a world-view and the socio-political structure and relations among a people. In specific terms, among the Basaa people, we named *mbog* as the world-view. We set out to *fathom the extent to which this world-view underpins social organisation* in the specific domains of political order and power relations in the everyday life of the Basaa people.

In every society, there is always some mechanism by means of which its members deal with social contingencies. Among the Basaa people, in the event of

some contingency, some individuals call a special meeting to consider the matter. The term for such a meeting is *likoda li-mbog*. When we relate *mbog* to the custom of meetings which arise whenever a Basaa group has to deal with a crisis or a turning point in the life of an individual or in the condition of the group, we are alluding to what in the humanities has been termed the African palaver. In this study, we go beyond the physical event of the so-called African palaver; mostly we are specifically mindful of the realm of thoughts and feelings which relate to a world-view in the manner in which the latter define the political integration one would find among a people. We consider the components of the Basaa variant of the African palaver and the basis on which they occur together. Specific questions we ask relate to:

1. The components of *likoda li-mbog*.
2. The fit of *likoda li-mbog* among other customs of the general Basaa social organisation.
3. The extent to which power differentials among the Basaa people are implied in the organisation and functioning of *likoda li-mbog*.
4. The nature and the extent of the grip of an overarching ordering system, namely of *mbog*, on political organisation in particular and on social structure in general among the Basaa people.

Like any other ethnographic study our report comprises a description and a reflexive appraisal of the ensemble of phenomena involved in the custom of *likoda li-mbog*.

### The hypothesis

The question we are considering is that of *mbog* as the steering component of the Basaa people, the manner in which it grips interpersonal relationships and interaction among a people, the characterisation it gives to the group and the very fact of definition it gives to being a group.

Our premise is that, for a society to be at all, there must be a steering component of the import of an ideology which informs every domain of social life and especially, which informs the domains of the realms of pattern maintenance and of social control. *Mbog* of the instance of an ideology or of the processes out of which a social entity of the dimensions of a group arises, or still of the custom of meetings is the Basaa archetype of such an event.

### Objective(s) of the study

The scientific explanation of a custom or of a social institution in a particular form in which it occurs in a given society can only be reached by an intensive study which enables us to see it as an instance of widespread phenomenon of a definite class. This means that the

whole social structure has to be thoroughly examined in order that the particular form and incidence of the institution can be understood as part of a consistent whole.

We have assumed the systems approach. The basic tenets of the systems approach were laid down in the 1920s by the Polish-born anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski and the British anthropologist Reginald Radcliffe-Brown. It consisted of analysing primitive communities [in the Pacific Islands: Trobriand and Andaman respectively] as on-going systemic wholes, looking for interactions of elements within them and the mechanisms through which each of the elements contributed to the satisfaction of some presumed needs of the people or some more abstract societal requisites. In the place of the traditional question, "How did the given institution, behaviour pattern, norm, value, etc., come about?" they substituted the question, "What is its present role, how does it fit into the context of a wider social whole?"

In the systems approach the proposal is that the institutions of a society be studied in their relationship with one another. This correlation must be taken into account in the explanation of any single one for the correlated institutions are not independent institutions, but are parts of one system. No explanation of one part of the system is satisfactory unless it fits in with an analysis of the system as a whole.

We suppose that the structure of the group in the process of its functioning causes the coming into being of any named social usage and that the social usage has a contribution to the total social life – itself implying a condition in which all the parts of the society under consideration work together with a sufficient degree of internal consistency.

In the manner of Radcliffe-Brown (1952), we seek to reveal the fit between a named social usage [custom] and the group within which it occurs, how it emerges from specifics of the context in which it occurs, and the function it fulfills – "the function" referring to the contribution which it makes to the total activity of which it is a part.

We propose to show that for a society to be at all, the possession of a steering component is fundamental; for the Basaa people we specifically propose to map the extent to which the steering component is implied and determines structure or pattern in interpersonal relations. It is the fact of *mbog* which guarantees predictability in interpersonal relations and direction and continuity in being when situations which conduce to sheering or which themselves mean uncertainty [vagueness] and thus crises arise.

Our study aims at a critical statement on the structure and organisation of the tribal assembly, specific processes out of which the tribal assembly [in its form among the Basaa people and in its mode of functioning]

might have arisen, and on its social control [pattern-maintaining] function:

*The ultimate objective we set for ourselves was the circumscription of a welter of social processes: modes of thinking and underlying values, social positions and roles involved in "the tribal assembly."* Identifying the system of the tribal assembly with sub-systems which arise in a group to enable it to meet its needs of social control and pattern maintenance; in this study we have sought to show this and hold up the Basaa variety as an archetype of similar arrangements in any ordered social entity.

### The chapters

This study is on the system of authority of the Basaa people. It is in seven chapters. Our point of departure has been the constellation of views on the concepts of power and authority relations in organised social life that are found in the Anthropology literature. We examine the events of power and authority relations and the various ways in which they articulate an overarching epistemology and world-view.

In chapter one, we give a restatement of the title to situate it in a sociological problem area. The problem area relates to aspects of social control which arise from the grip of a world-view on a people's behaviour. The term "*Likoda li-mbog*," translated as "the assembling of people" designates a crystallisation of a constellation of events which arise from the world-view we have named, constituting the essence of social control among the Basaa people as to constitute the primal mechanism of integration of the entire social system. We have also considered a number of concepts of topical interest as would sharpen the statement of the problem of the study, namely, a study of processes out of which social order results and the relevance of the system of values and norms in these processes.

In chapter two, the "*Review of the literature*," we relate the building blocks of organised social life paying particular attention to how people come to be together and how government might have arisen. In turn we considered social structure in general, authority relations and pattern maintenance, specific customs of crises management and *mbog* in the light of political theory.

On social structure, we gave a sketch on the advent of organised social life and the central role of a steering component. When we considered authority relations and pattern maintenance, we sought to explore the phenomenon of power in not so obvious considerations in everyday life. Under the subtopic specific customs of crises management, we did an overview of systems of social control according to forms of political integration. From our review of literature on *mbog* [*mbog* in the light of political theory] it would be noticed that in essence and

in the manner in which it relates to social structure, it is a steering component *par excellence* of the stature of entire systems of thought, a veritable *Weltanschauung*.

This discussion ends with a brief statement on specific customs of the management of crises to include the appreciation of the works of some social anthropologists which concerned the phenomenon of *mbog* among the Basaa people.

Chapter three relates the methodology followed in the study.

Chapter four is a statement on the purported origin and the identity of the Basaa people. Our submission in this chapter draws heavily from the works of Ngijol (1967), and from oral history.

We have tried to answer the question: "Who are the Basaa people?" Mostly, we drew from the history of movements of peoples around the globe since ancient Egypt, from indigenous mythologies, and from oral history. The exercise involved a good amount of stretching of the submissions of various historians including chroniclers to such an extent as might vitiate the scientific import of any final statement.

For the absence of definite written records of the history of the various peoples who are purported to constitute the Basaa people of today, a scientific statement on related issues must involve speculation and perhaps information which is not quite exact. We nonetheless would affirm that the fact of the amounts of incorrect entries and perhaps errors that may have found their way into this rather short statement notwithstanding, it would be legitimate to uphold the position we render even if it may be thus upheld only as a hypothesis on the origin and recent history of the Basaa people and on the content of the basis of their claim to be one people.

Chapter five is on the basic atoms of social life among the Basaa people. We began with a rather laboured statement of what we mean by crisis. The term "crisis" relates to events in the basic transitions in the life cycle of an individual, and breaches of the tribal law, in the manner in which they affect the existing lot of relationships and relations in a given group. The tribal assembly is an event of *social structure* which enables a group to manage contingency [flux] in the case of a crisis.

In this chapter, we set the pace for what may be termed a physiological study of a Basaa group. Our data sought to respond to the questions "How do structural systems persist?" "What are the mechanisms that maintain a network of relations in existence?" Morals, laws, etiquette, religion, government and education and other events are parts of the complex mechanism by which social structure exists and persists.

Specifically, we considered: conception; birth and the naming of the child; circumcision of male child; marriageable age and sex education of girls; betrothal; marriage; commensality among the Basaa people, polygyny, marriage status of Basaa son or daughter,

betrothal and marriage itself and issues relating to the status of the Basaa woman that cause large assemblies. These, invariably, are notable events in the Basaa system of the assembly.

In the sense of standardised modes of behaviour and customs, social institutions constitute the machinery by which a *social structure*, a network of social relations maintains its existence and continuity.

In chapter six we further explore the basic atoms of social life – the very issues we raised in Chapter Five – to consider kinship, authority relations and the patriarchal system, and *isai li ndombol* [family religion and blessings] among the Basaa people of Cameroon. We started with what we term "*the basic atoms of social life*," to ultimately consider the Basaa system of kinship. In our consideration, kinship is a feature of the grip of *mbog*<sup>1</sup> in the domain of relationships obtained among a people. As in many other ethnic systems, kinship greatly determines the political organisation of the Basaa people.

In chapter seven, we do a systematic analysis of specifically political entities among the Basaa people. As the title of this chapter suggests, at this stage of our submission we specifically relate the Basaa world-view and system of authority.

In this chapter, we considered the political organisation of a typical Basaa group, the *baKembe*. In this instance we give an ideal-typical representation of the Basaa state. The general picture of the paradigm of authority among the Basaa people is as follows: *ba-mbombog*<sup>2</sup> comprised the people's assembly – what we have termed "*likoda li-mbog*." Authentic participants arose from among the *ngweles* [of noble birth, not of mixed blood], the landed nobility.

A senior dignitary [the *nkaa-mbog*, *mbombog*, *hikoo mbog*, and such others] must be *ngweles*, in the direct line of descent from the founder of his group. In the council of *ba-mbombog* or *likoda li-mbog* the elected participant sat with a deliberative voice. By virtue of the status of his lineage, of his tribe, of his ethnic group or of the Basaa nation, he was the depository of power. At each of these three levels, he was the personification of *mbog*.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

Avowedly, the purview in which we consider the ensemble of phenomena of interest to us is phenomenology. In the phenomenological approach, the social scientist is enjoined to enter the individual's life-world, which is the place where people are directly involved with the world and from which position their experience originates, in order to understand what

<sup>1</sup>The world-view of the Basaa people.

<sup>2</sup>Singular: *mbombog* [patriarchs, men of wisdom, initiated heads of sections of the society, custodian of customs and the tradition among the Basaa people].

“being-in-the-world” is like.

The primary focus of a phenomenologically based social theory has been, following Schütz and Husserl, an emphasis on the commonsense construction of everyday reality, rather than the analysis of specifically intellectual consciousnesses as entities separate from mundane everyday knowledge.

Phenomenologists see a precise connection between the social relationships of individuals and the meanings those relationships have to the extent that the nature of those relationships and the structure of their intersubjective meaning defines the structure and the content of all knowledge. Our perspectives of reality are formed by the activity of social interaction, but not in some abstracted sense in which reality is external to the individual: interaction is the mechanism by which reality itself is constructed by social actors.

Phenomenology [the methodological approach] draws on these broad principles and is therefore a research method in which the analyst seeks to explore particular, personal accounts, accepting that they are the product of individual acts of reconstruction. It is therefore inductive: *explanation [theory] arises from the exploration of the lived experience and a study ought not to be driven by pre-determined theoretical perspectives.*

In this approach the social scientist seeks to know how the world appears to the individual and to convey this unique meaning by placing the informant as the expert “knower.” His analysis has a sensitive and contemplative focus; the social scientist, by attentively tuning in to the teller’s account, attempts to highlight those areas regarded by the narrator as everyday events, but which to the analyst may reveal important insights which require further interrogation. The “situated” nature of experience, the context, is central to the work of a researcher. An individual’s subjective awareness of a particular phenomenon is at least in part the product of contextual factors, such as the individual’s social or institutional position, network of formal and informal relationships, or physical location. The experience occurs in relation to others and will differ according to social relationships, such as those which involve power differentials.

The purview – in terms of a view of society – of our study is a system with a specifiable mode of organisation based on yet another at once implicit and explicit. “*Mbog*,” to name the other system, permeates every aspect of Basaa life. As a system of meanings, “*mbog*” amounts to a complete view of the world: ways in which a people perceive their shared reality.

In terms of an analysis of intentional acts, we in this study have tried to reconstitute the totality of meaning embodied in “*mbog*.” The crucial question which enchain our consideration was how this culturally integrating totality could be distilled from the various “objectifications” of the Basaa world, and how one could give a theoretical account of it. In other words, the

question was one of interpreting smaller-scale cultural phenomena as components of a *Weltanschauung*.

### Conceptual/theoretical framework

We would repeat our premise that the reality of groupness, in an absolute manner, presupposes the existence of a steering component, namely, the ideology or the *Weltanschauung* which determines the occurrence and the manner of the occurrence together of all that constitutes an ongoing social entity. The non-possession of one would mean an unlimited *unpredictability* in the manner in which individuals who are supposed to be a group, relate to each other and interact with one another. It would not be sensible to talk of a group in this case. For the Basaa people we named *mbog* as that steering component.

On the relation of *mbog* to *social structure*, our main instances of *mbog* [the construct and the event] would be social categories among the Basaa people, and their positions in relation to one another.

*Mbog*, again in its dimension of the folk wisdom on the Basaa way of doing things and what is proper conduct among the Basaa people, constitutes the *Weltanschauung* of the Basaa people. The processes out of which the Basaa man gets to acquire knowledge on what is proper conduct as it relates to social categories, as it relates to the prerogatives of the incumbent in any named category, would constitute socialisation in general, and political socialization when the dimension reflected upon relates to power differentials, and to influence.

On social structure proper; its components, the processes out of which the components arise, the processes still of the functioning which lend structure to social life and perhaps the processes still again which pertain to “*de-structure*” and to “*crises*,” the specifics we would contemplate are:

1. The overarching system of norms adumbrated by Basaa mythology and religion.
2. Elements of identity among the Basaa people and social categories.
3. How citizenship is defined among the Basaa people.
4. The family and kinship.
5. The basis of power differentials and authority relations.

Permanently, these are our considerations whenever we contemplate every single item in the manner in which it relates to predictability in group life and to structure as it may be observed in specific social and especially, political institutions among the Basaa people.

Through what we consider “*mbog*” to be, we trace partial manifestations of “*mbog*” back to *mbog* itself. Specific issues we were on the look out to collect data on were



social status, the content of political socialisation and political authority, events of meetings and the mode of functioning of systems of meetings.

We sought to grasp folk conceptions of membership, authority and power; authority and power differentials and attendant power relations; folk statement on what the tribal assembly is, what it is meant for and the processes involved in its functioning; the connection between concepts of social structure and beliefs in their specific manifestations when crises arise. Our main data collection techniques were participant observation, conversations and light chats, documentary and oral collections.

Investigations by means of participant observation are relatively easy when the social scientist who enters into an environment is not very different from the other members of the studied community. However, quite frequently, cultural barriers impede the observation of social behaviour, which is fully possible only when the researcher is accepted by the group which is being studied without reservations. In spite of this difficulty, the technique of participant observation is particularly valuable, since it enables access to all the details of the studied environment. Participation in the group life of a community permits learning their habits, the social norms accepted by them and their social behaviour, in their natural form.

In various situations, with diverse personalities, we inquired about the meanings of terms and of actions of topical interest. A number of works in existing literature which seemed directly related to our study were positively explored; some of the contents were considered (treated) as data and [interpreted and analysed] as such. Description and analyses [and discussion] were integrated – the nature of our data and of ethnographic reporting explained our option. We broke down our data and related particular items to the categories we mentioned above.

When a social scientist proceeds in this manner, the central question may be formulated simply as the possibility of grasping subjective meanings through a system of objective concepts. He proceeds, according to Schütz (1967), by observing “certain facts and events within social reality which refer to human action” and from these observations, he constructs “typical behaviour or course-of-action pattern.” He in effect, constructs an abstract model of the “world of everyday life” in accordance with the demands of his scientific problem *which once established, alone determined the criteria of relevance and the conceptual scheme to be used so that these models and concepts are not to be construed as being arbitrary.*

This involves building up what Schütz calls “meaning contexts,” classes of experience through similarity, sets of criteria if you wish, by means of which we organise our experience into a meaningful world.

## Validity concerns

We considered the need for validity checks on the data. This explained our choice of the multi-method approach to the collection of data. Otherwise, termed between methods triangulation, it adds some depth to the analysis of data and enhances their validity. In accordance with the exigency of the multi-method approach we were permanently mindful that the data elicited by means of the different techniques we used were comparable. The various sources enabled the assembly of different sorts of data.

We also used a second way to check our interview materials, namely, some kind of re-interview and re-analysis. We could not do re-interviews *per se*: what we did were after-conversations with some personalities chosen from among the people we had interviewed. On these encounters we tried to say what we had learned in the course of our stay on the field and deliberately requested that our interlocutors comment what we said and “straighten” our utterances when they found it necessary. Giving back the analysis to the informants in order to hear their responses to the picture painted by a researcher recognizes the central place occupied by them in the research process. The data analysis should be a transparent demonstration which links the participant’s talk and the researcher’s thoughts, making it more straightforward for the informant to concur or refute the researcher’s interpretation.

And indeed these after-encounters were very rewarding. There has been a philosophical shift [now extant] on the question of the probable relationship that may exist between the research questions of a study and the methods one chose to collect data.

## Sampling and data collection

According to legend, “Ott” is the name of one of numerous eponymous Ancestors of a named Basaa tribe. The term “*log Ott*” among the Basaa people designates descendants of Ott. For the purpose of our study we lived among *log Ott* of Dingom.<sup>3</sup> It is among these same people that most of our informants arose. The old man, Leba Mbelek, in whose residence we lived was a septuagenarian and the offspring of a girl-mother. He had returned to the country [his place of birth], after decades of service in the old state’s railway corporation. Even though he was still fit enough to continue industry in the domain in which he served the corporation, he left his home very little for anything. Mostly, whenever he left it would be to attend a burial, participate in a family meeting on the betrothal of a daughter or consult with an older man who was less able to move about, and such and

<sup>3</sup>See Map 3.

other event. When he allowed it we were part of his company – a priceless event for any youth. Contrary to many Basaa people of his age, he readily answered questions including personal questions. His wife *ngo*-Bayemi Pauline, a daughter of a noble family among the *log* Basangen, would unobtrusively get into our conversation to sometimes confirm an utterance of his or enrich it drawing from her own learning and experience in her home of origin, or to correct it. She would readily take questions on the condition of the woman among the Basaa people.

Among the *baKembe* [a Basaa tribe] among whom we stayed when we did a study on avuncular relationships, we had long conversations. We resided in the *bum* [unit of inheritance and succession] from which our mother's father arose. By the time we went to the country the resident *marj mut* [a grown-up and the most senior man, head of the homestead], Kaal Nkam, had been living there for over two decades after a period of activity in the city. He did not seem to be as knowledgeable on Basaa lore as another older *marj mut*, Matemb *ma-Mbelele*, of a neighbouring homestead. The two of them by a cursory reckoning could have been well in their eighties. We had long conversations with this other *marj mut* and spurred by enthusiasm prompted by our reading of Mboui's "*Mbog Liaa*," [we had just read it], issues on which we sought restatements were always coming to our mind. We would walk to his home without any forethought any time that we had a wave on an issue Mboui had considered and we thought that a commentary of his would make it actual in relation to what we were studying. We would mention that he used to be the State's councillor = tax collector [incorrectly referred to as *kinje*] for Bum'anga, one of the two *baKembe* hamlets in Babimbi. Though advanced in age and blind at the time of our encounter, he seemed to like our visits whatever the time and "livened" when he talked about *mbog*.

Sometimes he sent for us to go and eat with him and in conversation he would evoke memories of times with our mother's father.

Let us say that the three persons we name – hesitatingly, for we did not get their permission – were our main informants. We would readily refer to "interlocutors in conversation" as a general category. They were various and numerous.

Hans Banyuge replaced Matemb *ma-Mbelele* as the State's councillor for Bum'anga. In the exercise of his functions, he was very frequently on the move. Quite often, he invited us for company and we talked quite a lot. He would introduce us to other people we met. He readily commented items of folk life when he figured that we seemed to wonder. Mostly, this was when an interlocutor in conversation used some rarely used or far-fetched figures of speech – when he used "difficult" Basaa expressions or spoke with too many things taken for granted. The Basaa people use proverbs, images and

parabola a lot. There is hardly any [serious] talk without the use of proverbs. In a conversation, he who cites a proverb may know all its probable interpretations except if he uses one in the place of the other. It however is not always that he to whom he speaks when he uses a given proverb clearly understands, and even in the case of perfect understanding, he retains his freedom to behave as it pleases him.

We went into the country for the first time on May 19<sup>th</sup> 2001. The specific *log* Ott community among whom we elected residence are the *log* Ott of *Soŋ* Makun. The *log* Ott of *Soŋ* Makun, also happens to be *ba-nyandom* [the clan in which our mother's mother is a citizen by birth] to us. As a matter of fact we lived in the "*bum*" of *Bihen* *bi*-Makun our mother's mother's father.

In terms of size and in terms of the volume and variety in the activities which take place in *Dingom*, *Dingom* can be thought of as a hamlet: it comprises six main families<sup>4</sup> and the head of every homestead is known to the head of every other homestead and members of his home. Houses<sup>5</sup> stand on the sides of the main road. Otherwise, they are dispersed on a wider space, each one being more or less isolated. Roads enable movement among a number of homes of the hamlet.

In Basaa folk wisdom, roads are thought to have arisen as a result of civilisation and to bring civilisation. A place is what its roads are and the road literally indicates the degree of social cohesion.

In Basaa thinking, communality is a primitive condition. Basaa people live as extended families and share a lot among themselves. There is an almost complete absence of private life.

A typical homestead at *Dingom* comprises a man in his fifties or older, his wife [a good number of men have about three wives] and offspring who still depend on him, his brothers and their dependents including persons who in relation to the family are affines, especially girls and women who accompanied their sisters, and their own offspring and others. Otherwise, a homestead as we use the term designates a number of buildings, the inhabitants of which are for jural purposes under the authority of one man, the "*isanj mba*" among the Basaa people. Dotted around the place, one occasionally, sees some small plantations of cocoa and oil-palm. Otherwise, farming is mostly of food crops. Farm produce like cassava, cocoyams, various vegetables, palm nuts and palm oil, maize and groundnut constitute an important element of the local economy.

A good amount of lumbering<sup>6</sup> takes place here, but the local folk it seemed to us, are not squarely in it. We note with some interest though that noise from the activity of

<sup>4</sup>The *log* Bayi, the *log* Munda, the *log* Bakii *ba-Noŋ*, the *log* Njog *bi-Noŋ*, and the *log* Bang *bi-Noŋ* and the *ndog* Mongo [adopted and of slave descent].

<sup>5</sup>25 at the time of our stay.

<sup>6</sup>Some special woods in the forests are the *sipo*, the *sapeli*, and the *iroko*.

forest exploiters have scared wild life from the vicinity of inhabited areas directly affecting the old amounts of hunting, protein in local meals, and the contribution of hunting to symbols [of power] and to ritual in folk life.

On a market day [every other nine days – the number of days of a Basaa week] natives of Dingom and of satellite hamlets take farm produce they may desire to trade off to the market place [a notable crossroads]. Itinerant traders of industrial items such as textiles, pomades for the skin and women's ornamentals, and such other items, and drug peddlers may also be seen. On a market day the size of the population of Dingom increases by about three folds or so.

The density of the population around in the country is low. Social life is rather small in volume. The young have very few alternatives of activity to accompanying now their fathers when they went out to clear a farm, now their mothers when they went to turn a cleared bush into a farm.

On market days, we merely sat at home and observed passers-by; on some other days our recording concerned events we observed right in the homestead where we resided when some contemporary (ies) of the *marj mut* from another village or from other villages came to talk with him. Talks on these occasions were always a pretext for the *marj mut* to tell them about us as his "guest" and to "parade" us in discourse, summon his guests to appreciate the size of his family and its spread in the republic. Sometimes these talks were quite captivating: in conversation, the Basaa people, especially those of an established stature when their age and group prestige are considered, use a lot of allegories and proverbs. These encounters afforded us a great deal of what we would term an "ethnographic wash" in Basaa folklore, mores and *usii*.

The recording devices we used [audio tape recorders] could be set to come on their own, triggered by the sound they are intended to record within a specific radial range. This made it possible to record conversations without having to repeatedly and manually put our recording device on and off, which event we think, would have affected the more and more the naturalness of situations. Otherwise we with pen on paper, took notes which we used later to do our write ups adding what we remembered beyond our notes.

Other occasions we would cite for the "wash feel" we sought were events relating to births, marriages, deaths, and funerals; Christian assemblies on Sundays; notable departures for the city (the departure of a son or of certain "*mi marj mi bo!*" [senior members of the folk; singular: *marj mut*] was always a remarkable event); *séances* of divination in folk medicine; periodic family meetings which assembled huge sectors of residents of the country; events of the "*yum*."

Occasionally, we heard the beeping of the transistor radio from some homes and we learned that one inhabitant

owned a television set. There is no electrical power supply in Dingom but we were told that the man who owned a television set used what we figured was a petrol-fuelled electricity generator, for electricity which enabled him to run his television set.

There is a modern school and a church building in Dingom. Most of the young people among the residents of Dingom have had some number of years of formal education in the modern school, and many more speak some French.

Everyone puts on clothes [sewn in European style for most of the time] made of modern textile fabric. Men's casual attires are just a wraparound or some worn towel fastened around the waist, to cover that part of the body and below. Women put on a little more, and pants underneath and some blouse or something: it is not quite banal that women have pants as one of their under wears. Long female conversations are sometimes on the cost, colour, the type of pants a woman is putting on or cherishes or on whether a particular woman does put on pants at all, and on the feelings in pants. Apart from the practical use of under wears, it is quite apparent that it feels superior that it is known that a woman has pants on or can afford to have them on. In unfriendly verbal exchanges among women, a woman would readily display her under wears as an indication of her superiority. For the adult male and men of some age the formal attire is the "*sanja*," – an ample and colourful wraparound done in a typical style from the waist downward and a long-sleeved overlapping white shirt. The parallel for women is a loose gown with pleats for fitting around the bust – the bigger it is, so typical it issued to be – called the "*kaba ngondo*."

From relations in the city some people receive perfumed bathing soaps and pomade for their hair and skin. But the primitive forms of these items continue to be manufactured, and widely used.

A modern health delivery unit for the people of Dingom and a number of envioning villages is situated at about six kilometres away at Mbongoh. The health unit at Mbongoh has a general wing with the capacity of a score of patients if all the beds are occupied, and a maternity ward. The most senior person in the personnel is an auxiliary assistant. For serious cases people have to take their sick ones to the general hospital at Ndom or to Sagbayeme which are quite far away. For the transportation of serious cases of ill health, the wheelbarrow is an invaluable item. Almost always, the initial initiative of a sick person [or of his relations] is a recourse to the services of a diviner, a witch doctor, a traditional healer and herbalist, before he seeks [they seek] the advice and expertise of those with some knowledge of the modern scientific approach.

Bush streams and wells serve as the source of water for drinking and domestic use. The young [in their teens] go to the stream to get their wash. Voluntarily they would

defecate in the bush on their way to the stream, or in the stream before their wash, which carries away the *fæces*. Some homesteads have something like an outhouse – an enclosure out of fronds built around a pit overlain with wooden traverses with some provision to enable the dropping into the pit of *fæces* during engagements – for its adult members. Garbage is disposed of by simply throwing away around – in the bush. Domestic refuse seems to just disappear for it is mainly organic and vegetal in origin. Sometimes it is simply thrown to domestic animals as food: human *fæces* are a delicacy to some dogs and the pig.

We say all this to qualify the place at which we resided for a sample of possible places at which we could have stayed. The things we say, in those terms, define a typical Basaa country. In terms of personalities, we did not single out any categories for special attention: anytime and anywhere it occurred that we stayed for some considerable length of time, we took advantage of the stay to begin some conversation with just anyone who was available. There were “eminent” personages among our interlocutors in some of our conversations, but eminence among the Basaa people especially, is organic. The eminent man arises as the centre of a large family, the centre of folk and secular ritual. These conversations often opened up veritable vistas, some of which, for their distinct bearing on what we were studying, constituted very rich data. We priced these data much higher than data got from *recorded* interviews because in conversations, for most of the time we had several interlocutors at once: whenever any one person was talking, he raised or dealt with issues with which any other person could agree or not agree and for some cases, the issues pertained to shared experiences on which it was not easy to lie or add fabrications. At least this was our thinking. Whenever anyone seemed to say [fabulous things], this almost always triggered a spate of counter statements and pointed derisive qualifications of the speaker. This seems to be typical among Basaa people: in various circumstances we noticed a disposition for straight talking and candour when they censured speech which was judged unreasoned. It is important to say things which are true and to be coherent in speech. Even some of our own utterances were dealt with decisively: occasionally we were told what seemed to an interlocutor the unwisdom in some position we expressed. Some of our leads in conversation were platitudinous even to us, but, to be candid, there were occasions when it was objective censure, which made us aware of absence of sophistication suggested by some of the questions we asked or by some of the things we said.

We would emphasize the manner in which we chose our interlocutors in conversation. Judgement and opportunistic sampling, to name our sampling approaches, are processes by which field workers find many of the people who provide them with ethnographic

information. Such sampling does not usually follow any strict plan (Parten, 1950: 242-245). We would however append that we are mindful of reservations regarding the possibility of replicating any study which involved a great deal of these procedures as the parameters of the sampled universe are not particularly well drawn.

Did it bother us, did it not bother us whether in given exchanges among people in a conversation, the things we heard correctly depicted elements of Basaa lore? Perhaps there was an occasional serendipity in concrete details we learned because of the necessity of constantly checking the reliability of such conversation.

We said that the Basaa people of Cameroon live in six districts, constituting the majority of the inhabitants of two [Sanaga Maritime, and Nyong-and-Kelle], and in substantial numbers in four [Wouri, Nkam, Mungo, and Ocean]. Otherwise there are important colonies of Basaa people in a number of urban centres in the southern vicinity of the foot of Mount Cameroon, and the central districts of the modern Republic of Cameroon, the most notable being the Basaa people of Isokolo, Batoke and Mabeta [*Mabeda*] in what used to be Victoria [urban Limbe today], and the Basaa people of Nilon, Etoa Meki, Nkol Eton, Cité Verte, Nfudasi, Mokolo, Nkolmesen, and Mvog Ada in Yaounde. In these latter places, even though there is some continuity in the territories concerned, it would be far-fetched to consider the Basaa people who are there found as aboriginals.

We began our study with an extensive tour of the Basaa country proper and of the enclaves in urban [Limbe] and Yaounde. The poor conditions of means of communication commanded a slow tour. There are not enough roads in the country and most of the existing roads are seasonal. We had to do a lot of trekking. At certain stages we used the canoe and paddle. Otherwise though, it was salutary that the tour was slow; if we were interested in acquiring some acquaintance with the country and in getting a “fore feel” of the Basaa life-world, it would not have been wise to do a quick tour, nor did we need to do a tour in comfort. The tour enabled us to improve on our Basaa – we are a native but with urban upbringing: especially, our Basaa [the Basaa people speak Basaa] is not perfect – and to acquire some knowledge on how to find our way in the country and to get along with Basaa people. It was during our tour that we established our needs in relation to attention to our health during a prolonged stay in the country, appropriate clothing and footwears, communication with the city, and in relation to our work implements among other things. We learned seamliness relating to calling on the old on various occasions and to the Basaa people, *a fortiori* on country standards on proper behaviour during a conversation. Among the Basaa people there are no institutions with age as the exclusive basis but in the course of the normal development of a man the process naturally results in recruitments into various age

categories. In relation to every age category there is always a corresponding decorum. It was important to know this.

In designing our work for the field, we were guided by the view that cultural reality consists of ideas, beliefs, concepts, and values (shared mental events which govern, guide and direct observable behaviour). Specifically we were concerned with their occurrence in the spheres of social structure which can be specifically related to the phenomenon of power and political integration, namely, the overarching system of norms, the knowledge system, the system of education and the system of kinship of the Basaa people.

Initially, despite the idealist cast of our design, we envisaged a systematic ethno-sociological census of a number of villages of Babimbi II, but we retracted and decided to do a rather loose one [restricted to the sole hamlets of Bum'bunga, Malohé and Dingom], retaining quiet conversations and participant observation as the main tools of data collection.

For the census, our respondents were fathers or husbands: we entered every single homestead – sixteen in Bum'bunga and Malohé, and twenty-five in Dingom. Answers to the questions of the census schedules were intended to inform us on the composition of a typical Basaa home, the management of space, the extent to which foreign, especially non-African institutions have invaded folk space and of the general feel and pulse of the Basaa social system.

Deliberately, we endeavoured to make our encounters in every homestead as informal as possible, “tinkering” them to be as courteous as possible. When other individuals could be present, we allowed that. There were always some people who were just there, perhaps for the spectacle we constituted as people from the urban world. This was especially the case during our calls in the early period of our stay in the field. For some of our discussions we encouraged these “onlookers” to “join in.” Of course, the extent to which we controlled the situation was very slight. We were looking at the Basaa people in their natural “space.” In some homes we spent a whole day – and went there again on another day if we desired – exceeding by far the length of time necessary to deal a census schedule. Informal conversations which ensued during the census schedules informed our decisions to return or not to return to a homestead whenever we had to make that decision. In our choices we sought individuals who proved to know the lore and customs of the society very well and seemed disposed to talk about them. Many of our conversations were with septuagenarians who had spent a part of their life within Basaaland. Two of the individuals to whom we returned for conversation time and again were very old, perhaps over ninety years old or more. One of these two Matemb *ma-Mbelele* was, before he retired, the state councillor for Bum'bunga and at the time of our field work was, though

blind, the most senior among the “*ba-mbombog*” – patriarchs or grown-ups, esteemed for their wisdom especially in terms of Basaa lore, and for their cosmopolitanism – of the village.

The issues we raised in our conversations were not specifically planned. For some of our interlocutors in conversation we simply led them to talk about remarkable moments and “turning points” in their lives. For others the issues related to the general life cycle of birth, maturity and marriage: we talked about illnesses and deaths and associated events, disagreements within families, bans on some behaviours and relationships and such and other things. With our recording device, we recorded casual conversations among village folks in diverse situations like in the market on market days, at family meetings, evening chats, and when a visitor arrived.

Participant observation enabled us to learn at first hand about the social world of the Basaa people by our own involvement and participation in that world through a focus upon what individual actors said and did. We sought to investigate social behaviour in natural settings through watching people in their own territory, interacting with them in their own language, and on their own terms. We lived the experience of four “market days” each of which came after every other week, went to the forest to fetch firewood for our hosts, we were shown how to watch for cocoa seedlings when the farm was being cleared, process cassava for “*bobla*” and “*mungondó*” (Basaa delicacies) and even how to “throw the kola nut” in the context of folk religion (divination).

The non-standardised “interview” was chosen for its greater sensitivity to the social context of the interview. Into our conversations we could introduce materials which came to our mind during the course of conversation and ask questions out of sequence.

Entry into the field was a bit jerky. At the early stage of our work, when we dealt the census, some respondents expressed concern about what they figured we had come for: nobody had ever had to deal with the kind of researcher [whatever that meant] we said we were. Our claim to be interested in the culture and social organisation of the Basaa people seemed far-fetched and rather flimsy to explain what they figured were great amounts of resources we had pooled to be able to come and live among them. We could have been some agent of the modern state of Cameroon, sent to *in cognito*, do some “intelligence work”; or some spooky fortune seeker in search for people he would use for fortune-making rituals. In Basaaland, especially in this age of a heightened thirst for money and material glamour in life, a man's death is never thought to be of natural causes and is almost always invariably adduced to fortune seeking schemes of the kind we have just related. They expressed the hope that their children did not die mysterious deaths after our departure.

Their expression of fears (circumspection) was for quite

a great deal in our decision to revise our initial plan against a systematic census for many respondents were wary in their response to questions about the number of births their homes had registered, and about the number of surviving offspring. It was also a challenge, trying to make the folk appreciate the meaning of what we were doing and the purpose. For this we would be thankful for the initiative of the acting state councillor for Bum'bunga. To talk about the length of our stay on the field, we would say that, even though we took long breaks between the year of our tour and our last day in Dingom we put the aggregate length of the period of our fieldwork at thirty-six calendar months

## DISCUSSION

### On social structure

On marriage a Basaa woman removes to the local group of her husband. Predictability in the manner of the functioning of the Basaa social system seems to be based on equilibrium between rights and authority. Double filiation – paternal and uterine – are acknowledged with the same emphasis but distinguished in the sense that one tends to be more cultural, having to do with blessings, than the other, which alludes more directly to one's biological origin. Regarding an individual's ensemble of rights – an individual's status – ordinarily, it is paternal filiation that matters. Otherwise, in terms of kinship, there is a symmetry between the two lines of descent to the extent that the degrees of investigation as it concerns proscribed relations must always be the same for the two sides.

By virtue of an individual's double filiation one is expected to respect taboos of relationships with members of the clan of origin of one's father and mother. Biological parenthood seems to weigh more on the maternal side and determines one's inclinations and sentiments while the family of one's father is the source of blessings.

The Basaa people are an egalitarian group. Within a family and among siblings, ordinarily, no one is "more" than any other person or the others. It is blessings which create differences. But the order of birth and attending rights are important. An individual is not with wisdom simply because he or she is senior in age. Blessings are given according to observed tendencies in an individual and a hierarchy or even a new order arises.

The superiority of blessings over primogeniture is emphasised. As a socio-religious acknowledgement of pre-eminence in a given domain, blessings are the reward of irreproachable conduct or of the manifestation of a talent put to the service of a noble cause. Thus defined, blessings are definitely opposed to the fact of being born earlier as the mode of devolution of power. This opposition is not exclusive to the point where

blessings would lead to a complete ignoring of regards which stem from age, but the latter is no more just the reason for veneration, without that necessarily leading to a gerontocratic sort of power – quite to the contrary.

The patriarchal conception of group life one finds among the Basaa people very much suggests an empiricist factor in the sense in which one may be led to think of an institution which arose from the experience of the group and from intercourse with their neighbours. Within a family and among siblings, ordinarily, no one is "more" than any other person or the others. It is blessings which create differences. But the order of birth and attending rights are important. An individual is not with wisdom simply because he is senior in age. Blessings are given according to observed tendencies in an individual and a hierarchy and even a new order arises.

### The patriarchal system

The Basaa system of kinship is classificatory. It operates on two levels – that of appellations and that of address.

The first is fundamental and is based on the double criteria of age and sex. The second is a transformation of the first in which age and sex occur simply as anteriority. Appellations suggest defined rules of kinship in such a manner that all proscribed relations [incestuous relations] are immediately noticed.

The Basaa people acknowledge the indispensable role of the two sexes in procreation. Folk rules on descent emphasise mother's husband even if it is common knowledge that mother's husband is not the genitor. In their Basaa conceptions these two categories appear so close to one another to the extent that the Basaa people often use the term for one for the other: each of them at once means *genitor* and *pater* – as if the social father was always the *genitor* [father]. "*Isaŋ gwa*" [biological father] thus indicates "*isaŋ*," the true father [*genitor-pater*] through differentiation with other classificatory fathers of *Ego*.

To designate one or more persons who constitute the class of his "fathers," with the exception of his real father [biological-social] or of an individual who plays the role of sociological father, like the father-inheritor [leviratic husband of mother], the adoptive father or just a father who "feeds" *Ego*, *Ego*, according to the different cases, uses one of the following terms:

1. *tata wem (wes)/batata bem (bes)* [my (our) father/my (our) fathers]
2. *isoŋ woŋ [nan]/basoŋ boŋ [banan]* [your father/your fathers]
3. *isaŋ wee (wap)/basoŋ bee (bap)* [his (their) father/their fathers]

One would notice then that the distinguishing element

between the analytic and the classificatory usages is the disappearance of “*gwal*” the genetic qualification, and the appearance side by side with the substantive fundamentals of possessive adjectives.

Ordinarily, sociological paternity alludes to a category of relationships outside the normal category specifically suggestive of blood ties. The nomenclature to be determined relates the father-benefactor. We have “*isaj nyegla*” [father’s heir] and “*isaj nholos*” [father-benefactor]. The father-heir is most often a man who becomes husband to *Ego*’s mother after the death of *Ego*’s father [mother’s spouse]. He may not become that if the heredity decision dictates this quite extraordinary event [the heredity decision is not an arrangement among the familiar and the atmosphere involved in the procedure is sometimes full of spite] or when *Ego* is orphan of father and mother. His attitude towards his father’s heir is like his attitude towards his real father [biological father and or husband of the mother], but he designates him thus, that is to say, simply as the successor to the late man who naturally maintains the descent of *de cuius*. The education of a child can be legated to a non-relative. The father in this case would be a friend of the family’s. The child’s entire upbringing could take place under a non-blood-related “father,” in a different family and *mbai* altogether from that of its real but late father, and would return only at the moment of his or her marriage.

The categorial “mother” poses exactly the same problems as those we have been considering for “father.” We have “*ini*,” “*nyun*,” and “*nyan*.” We would mention for the memory the categorial “*mama*,” a term of address as extreme in extension as the term “*papa*.” It would be prudent to affirm that like the categorial “father,” the real etymology of the series corresponding to the categorial “mother” can be established only after a comparative study of the Bantu terminology. We relate a rendering of Mboui’s (1967).

If the terms “*ta*” and “*ini*” which are very often found in the set form “*ta ni ini*” are put aside, the terms “*isaj*” and “*isaj*” on the one hand and “*nyun*” and “*nyan*” on the other hand may be brought close together. The comparison would be reduced to “*isaj ni nyan*” for the two forms which refer firstly to the third person singular, to become impersonal like in the two terms “*nyan mba*” and “*isaj mba*” very much used in daily speech.

“*Isaj mba*” signifies “father of the house,” “head of the family,” and “*nyan mba*,” “mother of the home,” “mistress of the house.” An individual would tell anyone of the head of his family by using the term “*isaj mba*” and his attitude would be the same in talking of the mistress of the home, “*nyan mba*,” whether or not he is referring to his own parents.

We find “*isaj*” and “*nyan*” in some other usages whose consideration would enable a better grasp of their meaning: “*isaj nkaj*” and “*nyan likabo*” are representative of these diverse uses. If we consider

“*isaj*” as deriving from the parent, the first meaning which should be given to “*isaj nkaj*” would be “father of the territory” in opposition to “*isaj mba*” [father of the house] or “*injo bum*” [“head of the inheritance unit”].

Correctly, “*isaj nkaj*” suggests an authority over a territory which covers more space than the agglomeration of relatives – the “*mba*.” Otherwise, the term connotes nothing, which would suggest a genetic model of biological kinship: he is not the father of the village but he who enables the reign of order. We would add that he acts with consideration and understanding. In him, we have the archetype of authority, which is foremost heedful of the general good. Literally, he is protective without being overbearing. A coercive pattern tells of “*enel*,” “*ane*,” state power if you will, its basic structure being decision on the one hand, and submission on the other hand. In its indigenous conception the term “*nyenel*” [derivative of *enel*] comes very closely in meaning with the Latin term “*despota*.”

The term “*isaj nkaj*” suggests a reasonable chief whereas the term “*nyenel loj*” would allude to a chief who reigns without neither scruples nor concern for the legitimacy of his power. What ever the case, for the one like for the other we here have an individual who has power but who exercises it neither on a kinship nor a specifically territorial circumscription.

The ideal image of the “*isaj nkaj*” is that of a personage who governs – in all legitimacy – in a social unit, which is projected in real life even though it would be ungainly to state its basis. In effect, it is difficult to say – we cannot say – if one is “*isaj mba*” because one originated a new family or because one exercises real authority in a family. The question may be asked to know whether “*isaj*” is primarily of the terminology of kinship or of that of the domain of politics, for in the case of the Basaa people nothing indicates that the direction is from kinship to politics and not in the other way. The situation seems to be simpler with the term “*nyan*.” In “*nyan likabo*,” for instance we have the image of a rhizome [cocoyam] bearing numerous tuberinglings. This term always has the meaning of the *genetrix* – of the person who gives birth to new life. It is not only the fact of shoots which is underlined; it is also the welding between the mother and the offspring. It is never found in the vocabulary of authority even though its closeness with “*isaj*” has somehow “infected” it. The term “*isaj mba*” does not thus stand as the opposite to the term “*nyan mba*” – as the authority exercised by a man, opposed to the authority exercised by a woman. On the one hand, there is the good-willing patriarch of whom the proof of biological paternity is not a requirement to govern the home. On the other hand, a mother is literally “pregnant” of her household.

The next remarkable term in the paradigm of the Basaa kinship which affects the socio-political is the term “*isogol*.” One of the nominal forms of the generic verb

“sog,” *isogol* is directly suggestive of the proto-patriarcho-clan structure. Ordinarily, it occurs as the term for now the father of father, now the term for father of mother. In effect, the term “*isogol*,” despite the existence of a singular gender, is not an analytical term which would designate first the father of the father or the father of the mother. This usage is explained by a specialisation in a very general sense: in the plural form, “*ba isogol*,” literally and in the origin, was reserved for the designation of the oldest survivors of a specifiable social unit, namely, of the *ndap* and the *mbai* from a general point of view.

### Statues and authority according to generations

Theoretically, the status and authority of individuals who belong to the same family are defined by the stratified successive generational layers, and by chronological age. All members in a senior generation enjoy higher status and authority than those in a junior generation and among members of each differentiated group of relatives of the same generational level, older members take precedence over younger ones. A third factor in the situation is the proximity of biological relatedness. *Ego* himself is under heavier pressure from the status and authority of members closer to him in kinship and senior to him in both generation and actual age than with members of the same generation and age seniority but more distant from him in generation and chronological age. His status and authority are also graduated by the proximity or distance of kinship. Thus, *Ego's* relation to collaterals is inverse in “quantity” to the number of degrees. *Ego's* relation to a partrilineal relation is closer than to a collateral relative.

In a given generation, every male enjoys authority over all younger siblings. The youngest of siblings is under the authority of his older brothers, individually and taken together. Perhaps this youngest of siblings has no authority over anyone: in the context of primogeniture, if he has any authority at all it would be exercised on his own offspring and the offspring of his siblings. In relation to the oldest male of the next generation who is likely to be the offspring of a sibling who exercised authority over him, his position is quite unenviable. Conflicts between these two individuals would be quite difficult to avoid and fission of the *mbai* into groups according to allegiances would probably occur. This would be the beginning of a new structure of devolution which does, in an absolute manner, follow from parent to offspring.

Members of a generation at two removes below a given generation call each living member of the latter generation “*isogol*,” but it is to him who currently holds the prerogative of primogeniture that the term applies in a precise manner. We would indicate that by virtue of patriarchal devolution and paternal power, the identification of the patriarch as a veritable grand parent

is rather impertinent [incorrect]. In other words, kinship ties between successive generations are merely classificatory: a more precise schema would be required to explicate paternal power which foremost, is reserved for the socio-biological father when patriarchal devolution falls on the last survivor [youngest of living claimants]. Naturally, a man would be more under his own grandfather if he is alive, than under the senior brother of the latter. It is known that a father has real power over his offspring, even if he is limited in its exercise by the centralising authority of the patriarch, which restrains the son as well as the father. The fact that this pair is under a sole and superior authority attenuates the grip of the father on the son. The challenging of patriarchal authority and of its role in the organisation of the extended family takes a critique of relationships between adjoining generations: it is because a man [*Ego's* grandfather] considers his offspring [*Ego's* father] as an irresponsible minor that he would be in charge of the family of the latter.

From the socio-political point of view, the Basaa man is born into liberty only when he feels relieved from all ties of generational allegiance or of primogeniture. In reality the Basaa man escapes the dilemma only through the ever-increasing exigency to be personally involved in the democratic management of the *mbai* and of the *liten*. Succession in the order of birth has progressively been abandoned: individuals increasingly, tend to accept only the authority of true grandparents, their relatives at most, of the senior brothers of the same father, if the discrimination does not extend up to offspring of the same mother.

The term “*isogol*” occurs again in the term “*isogol-isogol*” for “great grandparents,” for “ancestor.” Mostly, it is used to designate an individual [a personage] who was already “of late”; in the case where it was used to designate a living great grandparent – when the great grandparent was living – his term for *Ego* would be “*ndandi*.” But *Ego* had no term for him. For *Ego*, the grandfather is prototypic of Ancestors of the group. Thus is it through the plural [of the “double” term] that the term “*ba isogol-isogol*” arises for “Ancestors.”

Finally, we have the term “*isogol m'an*” [small grandfather] which has no corresponding plural. It is a term of address used by *Ego* for anyone who bears the same name as a third person who he considers as grandfather. It should be understood that we refer to an individual who is at the same genealogical level with *Ego* or at a lower level. Thus, if *Ego's* brother is named after *Ego's* father's father, *Ego's* mother's father or any other individual of the same class, *Ego's* term of address for him is “*isogol m'an*” without it being allowed for him to say his personal name out of deference that is attached to it. It is the same situation if it is *Ego's* own son who received this patronymic. This custom is very general in names as well as in terms of address. We find the term “*m'an*”



attached to the terms “*majo*” and “*ta*” [papa]. It also serves to buffer the absence of certain terms in the order of *ascendance*, notably for “paternal grandfather” for whom the term “*isogo*” would be improper. There is the following construction: “*papa nkej*” [papa big] – grandfather which arises from parallelism between “*m’an*” [small or child] and “*nkej*” [big]. Perhaps the French “*grand-père*” [during the period when Cameroon was administered under the League of Nations as a trusteeship, and under the United Nations as a mandated territory, Basaaland was under French domination], it too, contributed in the creation of this recommended term.

The need for a precise term for “paternal grandfather” increases the more and more due to the net improvement in the chances of survival of this personage that has been observed during the past one hundred years or so. It exacts itself as much as the term “*isogo*” is equally a term of alliance to designate for the woman, the father of her husband and also, in opposition to “*nyogo*” [mother of husband or of wife].

### Intergenerational relations: distinctive customs

In structural terms, in this society, emphasis seems to reside on a structure of three generational strata. The ties between the first and the fourth are strictly personal, mostly, due to the fact that their frequency is very limited, as it may be deduced from the pyramid of ages of which natives have an intuitive notion. In the case of four successive generations, the ties of the second, third and fourth grip all attention. In a very distant past the *nhunug mut* [aged man] of the first generation saw his authority sensibly diminished not only over his son who was already a grandfather in relation to members of the fourth generation, but equally over members of the third and fourth generation. The trend is towards the epoch when the *nhunug mut* will be bereft of all authority and would be practically thought to be a living fossil to be “*ha ntim*” [put in a hole], as the Basaa people say.

In the case of the *nhunug mut* who was witness to the third generation of his descendants, if he was not the object of such ostracism, and if he experienced true joy for being a great grandfather, the former was definitely affected by some double meaning, and even by some spite. As a matter of fact, the birth of a great grandchild constituted for the very old man, a veritable death alarm. There is the belief among the Basaa people that great grandchildren foreshadowed imminent death for the aged man. These births seemed to remind him to prepare for the “long journey,” for at this age, the majority of members of his generation had “gone beyond.” The event thus presented him as a redundant anachronism. These customs are still valid. Between this aged man and his great grandchild relations are of strict avoidance. Perhaps they are the only sorts of anti-behaviour which

truly exist between any two Basaa relatives. Particularly, among the Basaa people, these two personalities do not meet one another without specific precautions being taken – precautions which are affected with medicines and ritual.

As much as a grandparent seems to be in a hurry to see his grandchildren with whom he entertains ties of great familiarity to the point where the popular etymology likens him to a guardian [nursing mother], so much is it that a great grandparent shrinks from encounters with his great grandchildren. At the birth of a great grandchild, he is religiously kept away from contact of any sort with this two times grandparent who can see him or touch him only after he must have undergone an immunising treatment against the *koŋ li ndandi* [a sickness associated with rules of avoidance which affect ties between great grandparents and great grandchildren].

To date, the prospects of the encounter with the “*ndandi*” is affected with dread, and even horror and the Basaa people do not take the recourse to the appropriate treatment by the medicine woman, lightly. Surprisingly, in this instance, serenity in the face of death is not acknowledged as an attribute of the old man: on the contrary, for the agony of the aged man is seldom peaceful and testifies of an astonishing agitation. So much does he seem to want to continue to live. For who ever knows what death means to these peasants who have an elaborate system of worship dedicated to the perennality of the human species – the *mbombog* is the incarnation of life *par excellence* – who know nothing else in the wild than lush and exuberance, dying is the original scandal. In many funerary laments one often hears the question: “why is one born if he is to die?” It is one of the major themes of Basaa folklore.

With the panic that the birth of a *ndindii* [a living parent of a grand parent] provokes, the vitality and the capacity of the *nhunug mut* as an individual who is in charge is over. In effect, the very few aged men who saw the birth of the *ndindii* are no more of this realm, it can be said. As we indicated earlier for the great grandparent, the four times grandparent and the three times grandparent would be a *fossil* suitable for a store, while he waits for his death. *He is stripped of every authority and responsibility: even in religious matters, his power is restricted to the sole activity of regular consultations.* It is like a sanctuary which is gradually but inexorably diminishing in activity. The term “*kid boŋ*” [to designate a living parent of the parent of a grand parent] may be considered as the last degree of analytical kinship ties between a descendant and an individual of an earlier generation.

Excepting the term “*isogo*” up to this point, all the terms we considered concerned reciprocal kinship ties that further removes from the initial couple. Thus, the term “*m’an*” exclusively designated the “child” in relation to *isaŋ*, itself, an exclusive term for “father.” The term “*kid boŋ*” seems however to stand as an anomaly, seemingly

reserved strictly for individuals of an earlier generation – for the oldest relation of a domestic unit, whose age classifies him in a generation which has passed away long ago.

### Ritual and authority relations

Within the Basaa family, relations are rather liberal. We consider the triplet of ties husband/wives, parents/offspring, child/junior – in other words, ties which arise from the basic trinomial in kinship analyses [affinity, filiation, consanguinity] – and the additional ties between the *nyanj mbai* and further wives in a given homestead.

The best moments of a Basaa woman are when she is beside her husband: then her self esteem is at its fullest. In all ways, a Basaa man would take care of his wife; he has to listen to her, give her a place to stay, a bed on which to sleep. He has to give her enough and good food and pet her and hold her to himself as one would keep a personal property – at all times, be alert that no misfortune he could prevent befall her. The Basaa woman should obey her husband, and tell him the things she can do to make their life together better. She is expected to embrace relatives of her husband who come to the home, as she would embrace him. It is in the understanding that she is their wife.

A man educates his wife to give the best of herself: for his own prestige, he endeavours to inculcate into her an outlook which reflects his own stature. A wife who is lacking in what is expected of wifery among the Basaa people simply reflects the insufficiencies of her husband. There are no restrictions regarding when and how she addressed her husband and talked to him. She can even lead in conversations when her husband received guests for, on matters of the “house” and on relations among the folk she was better informed than her husband: she would from time to time come in, to “straighten” the utterances of her husband. In truth, she is supposed to be the guardian of the house.

On relations within the family, the typical Basaa woman [wife] is an adept in intrigues. This has always been the case: in the modern Basaa family the woman in her position as guardian of the integrity of the home, is fully abreast on the head and tail of every single alliance and can afford to slander and talk foul, reconcile people and act as go-between, between disagreeing houses. If she is an expert in doing things and in making stories to marry a son or a daughter for instance, or to spoil an initiative which she does not want or like, her practical intelligence is deployed and finds rich substrates in the domain of rights of succession in which all sorts of chicanery are brought in through the interposition of relations.

She is the genitor. It is through her that life comes about. The Basaa say “*muda a ye lien li moog*” [the woman is the palm wine tree] “*munlom liumb*” [the man, that which

causes the wine to ferment]. The fermenting agent cannot rule over the palm tree.

Children derive their “status” from their mother’s husband [their father] but they are raised by their mother. Mostly, her teaching is couched in stories which she counts to her offspring in the evening. But equally, she readily resorts to flogging to deal with a bad case of misconduct. In the case of a *nyanj mbai* who turned out to be an idiot, this indeed would be a tragedy.

The Basaa woman is keenly attentive to her roles as wife and mother. She accepts only at the most extreme that she lost this status [very enviable] in the local group. In this double capacity she educates her offspring on the basis of paternal authority and works on very often tense relations between children and their father. In effect it affords a mother great joy to see that her husband before he dies is reconciled with their offspring and gives them a general blessing for the paternal curse is the greatest of opprobria that may be borne in parent/offspring relations. Among siblings or children in a home, seniors prevail upon juniors and boys upon girls in general thanks to their advantage of greater physical ability and strength. Younger siblings are at the beck and call of older ones. Sometimes, even parents cannot rescind the elder children’s orders. In every day activity, juniors learn lessons in both subordination and super ordination. An elder boy or girl might say, “*Me ga tcho matai hisi: ibale matai mana ma num ilo le u ntemb ni mbus me mbeb we*” [I’ll spit on the ground: if the spit dries up before your return, I’ll beat you up]. It is an injunction for the junior to be quick on an errand.

Relations which affect ties of filiation are very liberal: a father is generous towards his offspring and permits large freedoms for them. Conversely, the possibility of the event of ties of consanguinity changing due to a consecration, to become filial ties [from one generation to the other], breeds frustration, and is abhorred. Considerations affecting being senior are acknowledged mainly in the sense of the physical capability of the older individual to be of help to the younger person. In any case, it is only contingent whenever it is the case that the will of the father on who is to succeed him falls on him who was born first or who happens to be the oldest of offspring. Hence the expression among the Basaa people in answer to the question “Who is the senior among you?”: “*di bi gweene yag tata. Di nyi be yom ba sebel biman*” [we are offspring of our father. We do not know the thing of to be senior]. Horizontal relations within the same generation [genealogical level] are rather egalitarian even if the dimensions of gender or of relative age exact certain relations of dependence: blood relatives consider themselves as equals and believe that they are effectively under the authority of their parents at the same time that they have their own offspring under their authority.

A typical Basaa man, one of the stature of *mbombog* is

pithy when he speaks. He is mostly, a listener. He would not be known in joking with persons who are not by his own reckoning, of a certain standing on the matter of Basaa lore. He would seldom repeat himself, and would not entertain impertinent questions even from children. He keeps very little company and appears to speak on rare occasions of meetings. This attitude is general among the grown-ups and among the old. As a matter of fact, on the part of every member of the homestead of a man in which he is *isaŋ mbai*, he is the centre of a cult of deference which borders on veneration.

Relations between the youth and grown-ups are ordinarily difficult and transmission of knowledge on the origin and the nature of things and of man as a cosmic being, is laboured. Initiation into the mysteries of the family, and its religion is as active event: he who would be initiated was expected to seek initiation deliberately. The caution of grown-ups and of the old stems from the fact that initiation into these mysteries is ordinarily affected by pledges to abide to specified modes in one's life. Whoever desires to be initiated is required to purify himself and undertake an honest look into his conscience. He has to gauge his disposition (capacity) to observe strict rules but especially, he is required to live an exemplary life – shunning calumny, evil speech and homicide. Respect for the human being is the greatest risk for the man of morals, for to want to possess such secrets is to subscribe to equity against the arbitrary, to the protection of the individual against group tyranny. Initiation thus is not meant to enable the initiate to impose group ideals on others: rather, and foremost, it is to enable him to protect people, hence, the injunction to the *mbombog*: *u job baŋ i jimbi nyemb mut nye ki nye* [never be party to conjuration against the life of any one].

To the young man a father speaks in sentences never expecting him to answer back. His word is law and one of the greatest offences of which a son could be guilty would be to show himself lacking in respect to his father. There is a saying among the Basaa people, namely: *m'an a n'ejel be basan*. Whatever a citizen may become, however grown up he is, whatever lands he might have been to, he remains a child of his parents. He has to listen to them, be humble in their presence. However, any properly socialised "father" is an attentive observer of his offspring. He is especially attentive to inklings of incipient wisdom, generosity of the heart, and the broad mind which can be inferred from the general bearing of the child regarding specific things, the questions the child asks and the child's approach to questions and domestic situations.

As it is the case in most societies with a patriarchal organisation, a man, old and dying institutes his oldest male child as his heir. The Basaa people say, "*m'an munlom nu maŋ yen a ye inŋo isaŋ*" [it is the most senior male child who is on the head of his father]. This ordinarily suggests that in the position of the most senior

of male offspring of a man it is incumbent on him to ensure that his father gets a befitting burial. It is still the practice – it is the first son who gives the first stroke of the digger at the spot where his father would be buried. Recent ethnography, however, has revealed an attenuation of primogeniture. Mostly nowadays, the *isai li ndombol*, [the ritual which consecrates a child who may or may not be the first born or the oldest male child or even own offspring] is for the father the means by which he institutes as heir, spiritual and temporal, the most valorous of his male offspring. The choice of offspring for the position of "bearer of benediction" would be the offspring with discernible traits of level-headedness in his approach when he handled practical situations in domestic life, a track record of responsibility [being married and having offspring, stable relations among members of his house, appreciable levels of development of the latter], and with remarkable rallying abilities. Otherwise, a man may institute as heir, one of his daughters, a daughter "who resembles him" that is to say, who shows obvious masculine dispositions [authority, ways and such other attributes]. Instead of marrying the latter, he would retain her in his domain. The consecration, as a matter of fact, renders her "inexileable." A father may even give this blessing to his wife and not to any of his offspring. Equally, a complete "stranger" may be the beneficiary (Mboui, 1971).

In the politics of the "house," among the Basaa people, the mode is as follows: a Basaa man, old and approaching the time of his death in various ways begins to prepare his domain on how they would live when he would be no more. Apart from tangible *legs* like the "clan" space, livestock and perhaps living quarters, especially, his initiatives mostly concern the perpetuity of orderliness in his domain. The important question has to do with who replaces him in his role of *isaŋ mbai*. To the son, the consecration confers knowledge and the power to give blessings in his turn. He becomes the guardian of the entire patrimony – material and spiritual. However far-fetched it may seem, the proposal has been made that power be seen as an embodiment of persons, a sensation which they possess. Those persons would be powerful who displayed certain behaviours and symptoms that were recognised as the action of one who is powerful. Criteria would be publicly available for recognising as the appropriate display of power. Power would thus be personal.

An offspring on whom devolved the prerogative of sole manager of the domain of his father who is no more derives his legitimacy in his role from the spoken word of his father. This involved a solemn statement of what used to be and what the Basaa people call "*malombla ma-isaŋ*." The term "*malombla*" alludes to consecration: in this case, it is blessings which on the beneficiary confer power and responsibility. Initially, the beneficiary would have undergone some sort of tuition – mostly informal

initiation into specific knowledge on the tribe's and the family's history including migrations and personalities, the extent of the clan space, the basis of the authority of the father, the family religion and such other questions.

Repeatedly, the father tells the members of his domain his choice of a given child and teaches them its implications. With ostentation, he would for instance seat the indicated child in the doorway into his main house. Like he himself no one may obstruct this offspring of his from sitting in the doorway of his main house.

In Basaa thinking, to have been consecrated is an event of greater moment than to be senior in age. One does not get blessings simply because his father bore blessings; or again is it that the giving of blessings is according to the arbitrary choice of some divinity. As a matter of fact blessings are earned. The son who would be consecrated is the son who was dedicated in efforts, humble in disposition and inclined to inquiry of a certain kind. The consecration is much less a rite to be performed than standards of virtue to be constantly upheld.

It may occur that someone did not agree with the choice and decided in various ways, to try to undermine it. It is frequent among the Basaa people: a Basaa man resents the event of a secondary position to that of anyone of the same generation as he himself. However, as far as the particular event of who gets his father's blessings is concerned, while a father lived, he ensured that his *edict* was acknowledged and heeded by everyone. An expression of non-acceptance by anyone was improper behaviour towards an *ascendant*, irreverence towards family traditions and amounted to a rebellion. In *rebellion* an individual may win the sympathy of some members of the group in his non-acceptance of the choice of the father. The decision of the father usually remained unchanged even after his death. An individual who arrogated to himself the position of the chosen one, did not become the chosen one *de jure* [in secular politics, the seat of authority may be acquired by force, or through some non-instituted means, and later formalised by ritual] – as in instances where “insignia” of power give concrete reality to the latter and their possession may be sufficient as the basis of the legitimacy of the possessor [Balandier, 1978]: when an army or some sector of a society carry out what is called a *coup d'État* for instance, and later get a new personnel sworn in as the new authority in the land. It would even be of no use to resort to scrimmage or specific acts of hostility which entail the use of force on the part of the chosen one to bring him to order. The power of the chosen one resided in his inner knowledge of the family tradition that he learns from the father. In learning the family tradition the consecrated heir acquired knowledge on Basaa lore on man's position in the universe and on harmony with the elements. This is what we have termed *mbog* in an earlier discourse.

As a custom, the consecration of a chosen son always

involves ritual and ceremony.

In relation to his offspring a man reigns. Towards the individual in authority within a family one's attitude is at once an attitude of great suspicion and of a claim to the very authority. Basaa oral traditions suggest that the Basaa society has known many internal crises. Mostly, these crises were directed against the patriarchal system which seemed overly oppressive against the youth and against women. The pattern surmised was that from time to time, some “strong man” of the caste of great warriors arose and imposed his dictatorship on the clan and on neighbouring clans.

In the exercise of authority the pattern is that of absolutism and infallibility. This seems to be a universal. The important question has to do with the possession of authority. To whom did authority devolve? Who endured its exercise? It is never in complete quietude that a Basaa man lives the condition of being under the authority of another man even though within individual families, the legitimacy of the authority of the *isari mbai* is acknowledged. A typical Basaa man is an absolute master in his house and would almost at any cost exert himself to remain at the centre of every ritual in his domain. At the worst, the source of any influence on him, and the exercise of authority over him would be from individuals in specifiable positions in relationships by blood and from entities which arise from the wider pool of his relations. Being an agrarian and very compartmentalised society, abundance of forests enables every family to enjoy some relative independence. The Basaa people think of the modern organisation of people as frustrating and heretical. The case of a single person being the sole locus of power surely rhymes with the despotism of the bloodthirsty, non-respecter of venerated customs, of ancient religions and the rights of persons and of families. The usurper can never hope that by the sheer use of force he will impose obedience.

Conflicts which arise between rights stemming from birth and their refashioning by means of blessings are not taken for granted: the Basaa society is based on disequilibria which tend towards an ever unstable situation. For not having any sphere where in case of need, decisions can be made with the smoothness that the application of recipes would suggest, this society it would seem, is permanently on the brink into anarchy.

The distribution of roles [road watchman, the *mpodol*, the warrior, the organiser of feasts, the healer, the diviner, the drummer, the lawmaker] has, as a consequence not to confer to a single individual supreme power. None of the members of the social categories as we state them would be an overlord for his role in the land. Of course the “bearer of benediction” is of an extraordinary category for being the one through whom benediction gets to others in a given group. The Basaa idea on “human nature,” on “the human species” presumes that whatever the position of a man,

the difference between men would never lead to an irreducible condition, such that looking low on anyone would be a norm in social life. Whence the Basaa theory of the complementarities of activities and individual roles as they concur to group solidarity.

The entire system is built on this base. An additional Basaa adage which would be instructive in this regard is: *Pom woo ikan be tjomb* [a single hand cannot tie up]. However, if the proper accomplishment of tasks demand that they be assigned to various workers, the idea of strict caste delimitations or corporations with keenly guarded prerogatives is completely ruled out. Basaa division of labour acknowledges the limits of individual action and thanks to co-operation that it establishes, it largely compensates for insufficiencies of the isolated and overwhelmed worker; besides nobody is restricted once and for all to a particular task.

The very individual who is blessed cannot without stumbling, be contemptuous of the natural order of birth, and if he himself is under such an imperative, it cannot be expected that just anyone would arrogate to himself so great a merit to the extent whereby he would lay claims on special privileges. Not even slavery is a definitive condition.

According to [the statutes of the Basaa people as a group], regarding claims to the family estate, the right of being born before or of being the most senior among siblings qualifies one for the "status" of sole manager when the father died.

This is the case in general. What one observes however is that the position of sole manager devolves on him who has been consecrated as the *successor* by the father: he may be or may not be the first born or even own offspring.

To have acquired blessings does not mean that ties of consanguinity with one's siblings cease to be nor that the beneficiary becomes senior. The mores as they relate to positions by birth and as they relate to blood ties are not simply, overthrown. This would be contradictory to a cardinal Basaa ideal, namely, the ideal of fraternity among the group. *Gwelna gwelna kiki bilen bi nyol* [In the manner of the beams of a roof, kinsmen should be solidary], the Basaa people would say. Blood ties or position by birth [primogeniture] mean great duties for the beneficiary of blessings. He has to be particularly heedful to perform divers duties and notably of honours due to age and consanguinity.

Blessings do not cancel the stipulations of *mbog* – in this case, the exigencies of the mores and usages: on the contrary. The consecration of an individual in a position of duty does not confer on the beneficiary, reigning powers or the prerogative to order people about or again, the power to exclude sectors of the group.

Rather, his relevance by virtue of the consecration pertains to duties of the guarantor of the traditions of the land.

### On political organisation specifically

In any given Basaa community, any other man is *ma'nyan*, *man'ke* or *iloga*. When they are restrictive in meaning, the terms "*ma'nyan*" and "*man'ke*" are appropriate non-gender terms of address among siblings. The term "*iloga*" [boy] tends to have the same meaning as the English "fellow countryman." The structure is typical: for every Basaa group we have two main categories of persons, namely, masters of the land, and clients. The Basaa term for the former category is "*bed lor*" or "*bed mbog*." The clients or "*balolo*" come from elsewhere. Within each of these categories there are diverse types of categories of relatives. The Basaa people themselves refer to the "*ngweles*" and the "*m'an nem nkor*" in the first category. The *ngweles* is the "pure blood" indigene. The term "*ngweles*" specifically tells of the descent of an individual's mother or father: in their genealogy, it should be possible to locate them in relation to a named ancestor. The *m'an nem nkor* refers to an offspring of a monagnatic marriage, that is, of a daughter who never left the group for marriage into another tribe.

Going by the term to designate them, the *balolo* are those who come from elsewhere. They are made up of the *biyoyo* [immigrants], *baloo ndjel* [non-integrated clients, *protégés*], *minyom* [captives arising from a debt or war or ransom], *m'inkol* [bought slaves]. These cannot claim citizenship by origin and do not have land rights. They do not participate directly in the determination of laws.

The stump group recognised certain rights of theirs like the right to marry, found a homestead, own property of theirs, inherit and pass on their property to their offspring. With regard to the enjoyment of these rights, the length of the period of residence was an important factor. It has occurred in the past that *biyoyo* inherited from the parent through whom they came to belong to a named group.

A *mbai* comprises its freeborn and its slaves. The slave who asserts himself in his family thanks to his obedience, strength and numerous and great services was treated as a son and had his place and right to speech during family sittings. Being a son of his family and a member of its council, the slave was married by the *isanj mbai* – his offspring in his status of slave were offspring of the *isanj mbai* – and was attributed a space to build a *kishin*<sup>7</sup> for his wife. A *isanj mbai* – on occasion, a *mbombog* – may decide to give his blessings to a slave: the condition of being a slave is thus not one which cannot be transcended. A man born free can become a slave. The Basaa people say: *ki u ndogbene lihaa, hala ki nyen to isonj to nyun to manyun lihaa jon be li* [If you disobey your family, then your father, your mother and your brothers are not your family].

A slave through blessings can become illustrious and

<sup>7</sup>Kitchen hut – the wife's house in which she lives with her offspring,

noble. Mostly it was through a curse as the sanction for a specified misconduct that a man became a slave. If slavery is considered as an act of sales, it is in the sense that it removes the individual from his place of birth, the basis of his status and freedom. In effect he who lives away from home has little rights. One exogenous slavery, namely, of the group constituted of pariahs bought from distant, generally non-Basaa tribes, or war captives, may be acknowledged. It is impossible for a member of a clan to be in this condition even if as a matter of fact, the most disinherited live in conditions which come close to slavery. Not very long ago, when one committed a particularly heinous crime [felony] or breached a redoubtable taboo, instead of the person being executed as it was done in very remote times, he was given a distinctive marking – a hole in the ear lobe for instance – and sold off, or simply sent into exile. A man could be sold off if he disobeyed his family or his clan. A man, who, by himself separated himself from his family or his clan was said to have sold himself.

There are not only categories of relations among the Basaa people. The Basaa people also have age-based classes. One would thus find *m'nhunug mi bot* [the aged], *mimsi mi bot* [adults] and *wanda bot* [adolescents]. In each aged-based class, one would find all members of the categories of relatives we named above. That said, only members of the first two named classes of relations, the *ngweles* and the *m'an n'em nkorj*, enjoy true political rights. All spokesmen in this organisation arose from these two classes. When the members of these categories decide on any issue, they represent the *lorj* [people]: their sittings constitute *mbog* as an institution [customs] of meetings. In this instance they personify the concept.

Of the three age-based classes we stated above, the *ba-mbombog* arise from that of the *m'nhunug mi bot*. Possessing plenty of experience of a certain kind due to a long life, having scaled all the stages of initiation into *mbog*, they are men of wisdom and may be regarded as custodians of the customs – being for most of the time the oldest of their lineages, or the spokesmen or *bi kinj* that is to say, those who have the *kinj* [voice] to express the will of those they represent. The Basaa people say: “*a gwe kinj hgp*,” to designate the one among them who is the authorised voice. A more used term is the term “*mpodol lorj*” [the people’s spokesman].

The notion of being older or of being the oldest has a number of other elements attached to it. It is not the age of a man alone which may be taken into consideration, but equally, the position according to primogeniture of his clan in the *liten*. In the event of a festival, it may occur that a man is admitted to the sharing of gifts as it is the custom among notables [*m'imarj mi bot*: grown ups] of the lineage whereas some really older man would not be admitted. The family which descends from a senior among brothers comes before those which arise from

juniors. Equally, for the position of “*mbombog*,” a man who is of the descent of a senior among brothers may be given deferred admission. In any case, in this particular event of the social organisation of the Basaa people, the right of precedence in the order of birth is emphasised. The leading clan according to the order of precedence by birth is at the top in rank in relation to others of the lineage.

### Political training

There is the Basaa saying that *mut a mpulne be lilelel* [one does not rush to a destination at which it is known that he will spend the night]. In this saying, it is the youth [*wanda bot*] who are interpellated. The stage of political engagement is thought to be the natural destination of every grown-up and so the absence of any need for specific and especially frantic activity on the part of the youth. That said, the individual is not completely kept in the dark from the political thing. There has always been an awareness that society will always be. The Basaa people say: *mbog wog, minson mi yigha* [the world passes away, deeds remain]. The purports to this saying relate the replacement of the old when they die, by the youth when they come of age.

A *mbombog* is always accompanied by an acolyte of his and some youth who carry his personal effects and handle his manly chores. In this assisting roles these individuals learn for the future role and with time they moved to the position of *dikoo mbog* and to that of *mbombog* when they are initiated accordingly.

A related folklore [which concerns the political development of the youth] in this regard is the children’s game of *m'barj* among the Basaa people, frozen in the following verse:

*M'barj ni ma'ndon* [politics has to do with being crafty]  
*lbale u nyi mo* [if you are apprised]  
*Ba nol be we m'barj* [you never lose in the game].

The term “*m'barj*” derives from the verb “*barj*” [to fabricate, construct, combine]. To “fabricate a bed out of bamboo” for instance, is rendered as “*ban kaka*.” “*Barj*” also stands for “to combine”; hence the other meaning of “combination,” and “*m'barj*” or combination game. Even political philosophy which *determines* the entire set of affairs of interest to the state may also be rendered as “*m'barj*.”

For a profounder appreciation of the wisdom expressed in the verse we rendered above, we consider the children’s game. This children’s game is played in the following manner: children allot themselves into two rival groups. In turns pairs of players one from each of the two groups, step forward. The players play in dance steps – dance steps against dance steps, one player against

another player. The play of dance steps continues for as long as the players dance as it had been anteriorly agreed. However, the cunning dancer, the crafty dancer, when he leads the dance [each player does in turns], would always seek to confound his adversary by jumbling the order in which he plays his legs in the dance. He who, instead of playing with the left leg for instance, when the other plays with the right leg [which is right for him in the particular play] plays with the right leg, wins. If this happens three times in succession in favour of the same dancer, his adversary in the play of steps, steps aside and another dancer from the adversary group steps forward and the game continues. It may happen that a very "skilled" player out-play a large number of adversary team mates in one play. This player would be "consecrated" "*ngum*." The "*ngum*" is a man who in African wrestling, never goes down. It is for this reason that our champion dancer of the *m'banj* by analogy is called "*ngum*." Through this sort of official consecration he acquires a certain glory, a first place among his team mates, and among players of the game. As it stands, involvement in *m'banj* is a typical item of the process of political socialisation among the Basaa people. We would say that from a rather young age the Basaa man, without undue deliberateness, sort of caught the "virus" of politics.<sup>8</sup> Of course physical effort was involved in the game of *m'banj*: however it was more the mental, intellectual construction which mattered such that, by extrapolation, in context, this custom, considering the management of the affairs of the "city" [*lorj* or *mbogj*] is only a simple application. It would not thus be surprising to notice a particularly engaged attitude among the Basaa people among whom it is known that, in life, it is only true builders who are worthy of their milieu. A second poem is instructive in this regard:

*Hitiga hi ye be* [deceit is bad]

*Ba-isogol ba bi te mben* [the Ancestors proscribed it]

*M'banj itiga* [in the game of politics (*m'banj*)]

*Utiga wee u mwo* [he who infringes the rule, dies]

In addition to warning on the dangers, which may result from a bad engagement in politics, the Basaa lawgiver has also indicated the consequences for those who would get involved in it unapprised. On the matter of the government of societies as it is taught by the great initiates into *mbog*, this is the lesson which lends itself for appraisal during the cycle the Basaa term "*ngoba*." Thus armed with this tool, the young man could later and knowledgeably seek the position of the consecrated *mbombog* or *mpodol* [plural: *ba-podol*, to designate spokesmen].

<sup>8</sup>Our usage of this term in this context derives from the Basaa conception given to us by Wonyu (1975) of namely, the art of governing a state, or the ways of conducting the concerns of the state.

Play draws its great essential themes from the realities of life: chase and cunning, proving of physical and mental powers, the contest and reliance on chance. By freeing these themes (forms) from the substance of real life, play gets its cheerfulness but also the symbolic significance that distinguishes it from pure pastime. To consider games in general, and especially games which involve team activity for some more or less prolonged period, patterns of relations and of leadership arise. Perhaps the individual whose action in plays have been decisive for many victories is the same person who says the strategy for probable results. We may talk of the play leader or the initiator or something. Even for an event like games, some order is necessary and in addition to the rules of play and the related lore, power relations and leadership and an important component.

We would indicate for specific appreciation that all the *ba-mbombog* even though are *bed mbog* in essence, are not *ba-podol*. Let us say, the *mbombog* here would designate the "citizen" in the modern state. Even though in the modern state every citizen expectedly attends the modern school, learns so many things, not every citizen is for this, as a consequence, a leader of other citizens. It is specialisation, which determines categories of functions. Future *ba-podol* were thus constrained after a general orientation, to some future specialisation. It is this specialisation, which gives the meaning of the term "*kob mbog*," to learn to lead the people through *ngoba* [a special teaching]. The Basaa people would say: "*m'an sem a nkob mbog*" to relate the occupation of the son of so and so who is studying *mbog*. Whence the term "*ngoba likan*" to designate the study of the sciences as it is conceived among the Basaa people. Learning the traditions of the land relates primarily to intellectual disposition, and to the moral qualities of the beneficiary of initiation, and only after, to the pupil's ability to memorise. It would however be reasonable to entertain that there has always been some amounts of inheritance of functions. The Basaa people say: "*m'an ka dibaba ki nyan*" [of the scales of the baby pangolin, like those of its mother's].<sup>9</sup> The purports suggest a people's expectations of the *son of his father*. It is the thinking among the Basaa people that the deeds of a son's today would be like the deeds of his father's yesterday. In various domains – politics, religion, poetry and such others – the old Basaa society acknowledged the charisma of certain families. In a given polity, the art of politics is not conceived by everyone in the same way. The recipes change meanings with individuals, situations, and epochs. We may distinguish the genuine art of governing, that is to say leading and determining the efficient forms of the activity of the [state] as state property, from schemes aimed at ensuring the triumph of personal interests

<sup>9</sup>This proverb originated from the preceptor Mañal when he discoursed on the question of succession (Mboui, 1967: 219).

[otherwise known as political intrigues]. “*Hitiga hi ye be!*” refers to some slippery creature, the eel, in a hole. When it occurs in a parley, it is an allusion to scheming intended to wheedle and confound an unapprised or witless adversary. The translation of the myth of “*Mbarj*”<sup>10</sup> thus availed the Basaa youth with acquaintance with what may be termed pettifogging and buccaneering in politics, and an obvious level of sophistication as would enable him to appreciate demagoguery or scheming when he met them.

### ***Likoda li ba-mbombog***

The analysis we give in this section arose from assorted data we assembled on the occasion of an earlier descent of ours on the field. On that occasion, we were considering customs centred on the [status] of the sister’s offspring among the Basaa people. The specific group among whom we lived are the *baKembe*. All oral traditions which relate Basaa mythology are concordant on the aboriginality of the *baKembe* tribe among the Basaa people. With specific attention to the issues of elective positions and their mode of designation, the role of the *mbombog* as a designated member of the assembly of *mbog* in session when they legislate [*litee matij ma mbog*], we are proposing the description of the *baKembe* as a typical occurrence.

*Strictu sensu* the *baKembe* occupy a small territory surrounded by the *log* Ntomb, the *log* Biem, the *log* Ott, the Bati and Mangond. With these other groups, they are the supposed descendants of Mbarj one of the epical personages [the third of the nine brothers who emerged from the Grotto] in the *epicus* related in “*Mbog Liaa*.” This designation includes a number of lineages. For the present case there are twelve main families.<sup>11</sup> The Basaa term which comes closest in meaning to the English term “lineage” is the term “*liten*” [singular for “*maten*”]. Each [extended] family is designated by the prefix “*log-*” attached to the name of an eponymous originator. Comprising each *liten* we have *ma’mbai*, distinctively conjugal units of siblings and their wives and their offspring, and some *balolo*. The management of property and of persons at the level of the *mbai* is the reserved domain of the *isanj mbai*, or the *nywet mbai*. The twelve families together constitute *lihaa li baKembe* [the *baKembe* kinsfolk]. For each of these units there is a spokesman. The spokesman of the clan is “elected” through a kind of restricted suffrage, each “house” choosing its spokesman, the ensemble choosing the

lineage spokesman and the latter choosing the spokesman at last.

Among the *baKembe*, the *maten* had to delegate a *mbombog* each to the *boma mbog* [grand assembly] of the *baKembe*. When these twelve *ba-mbombog* assembled, they personified the sovereignty of the *baKembe*. When among the *baKembe* it is said that: “*mbog* has decided that,” the purports are that the *baKembe*, through their most qualified deputies, have thus decided. The involvement [personal] of its *ba isanj ba’mbai* and its *ba isanj ba maten* [heads of houses and of maximal lineages respectively] was implicit. These various accepted levels of decision had just one objective: to ensure the equilibrium of the *liten* without any element of absolutism at the level of the home or ward from the smallest to the largest.

To restate the situation we have just related, among a Basaa group of the dimensions of a tribe like the *baKembe*, the legislative function is exercised within the *mahaa* [plural of *lihaa*: minimal lineage] through *maten* [maximal lineages] to attain the level of the *lorj* [the entire people] and *Mbog* Basaa through its *ba-mbombog* – *bona fides* sons and descendants of Mbarj. The senior *mbombog* [senior in age and in level of initiation into *mbog*] among the *ba-mbombog* of the *baKembe* assembly possessed as distinguishing insignia apart from those in the possession of the *mbombog* ordinarily, the *hond bakoo*. The *hond bakoo* [literally the hatchet of pygmies] is one of the sacred objects that were handed to the *mbombog* on the occasion of his consecration. The possessor is Master and Priest of the religion of the group. The pygmies [the Basaa people call them the Bakoo], the first occupants of the territories that his ancestors dislodged, are under him. The term “*hond bakoo*” also designates the position of the possessor of the artefact. In the old society the *hond bakoo* was the head of the *lihaa* [tribe] and referred to an ancestor situated at the eleventh or at the twelfth genealogical rung. Otherwise, he was what the Basaa people themselves refer to as the *nkaa-mbog*. It was he who enjoyed the prerogative of tribal head. This position is to be distinguished from that of the *dikoo di mbog*, the position and title of the other *ba-mbombog*, who assisted him at the level of the tribe. The *nkaa-mbog* arose among the *ba isanj ba mbai*. The choice of who became the *nkaa-mbog* was revealed by an *oraculum*.

The *nkaa-mbog* posed as the intermediary between the visible reality and the invisible reality, as the appropriate representative of the founding ancestor. The lineage council which instituted this exceptional *mbombog*, and could withdraw [resign] him, equally pronounced exclusion from the group, any member who committed an unredeemable felony like murder, decided the vengeance of prejudice caused to a member of the group. His power got additional legitimation from the position of his domain, usually situated near a sacred place where

<sup>10</sup>WONYU, E. (n. d.), “Mbarj,” typed scripts.

<sup>11</sup>The names of the apical ancestors of the *baKembe* families are: Iyam Sop, Bitja *bi-Mode* Sop, Bayi *ba-Mode* Sop, Mananj *ma-Mode* Sop, Nuga *ba-Mode* Sop, Bayiga *ba-Mode* Sop, Bisee *bi-Mode* Sop, Mbag *ba-Nonj ba-Mode* Sop, Kom *bi-Mode* Sop, Mba’ga *Mode* Sop, Mbarj *Mode* Sop, Lileag *li-Ngana* Mananj *bi-Mode* Sop.



communication between the community of the living and those of the Ancestors and deities took place. Otherwise, it was “up.” One went “up.” Any other place was “below.” When the need arose, he used a “talking drum” or an ivory cornet to call to meetings. The successor to this *mbombog*, the senior son among the sons of the senior branch of the lineage, was not always the offspring of the *mbombog*. At the moment when he was consecrated, the chosen one received a panther skin, an amulet necklace, a *djai*, and a copper bracelet which made him the lieutenant of the sky divinity.

The *nkaa-mbog* within the *baKembe* tribe for instance, was a *mpodol*, he who spoke in the name of everyone. At the level of the ethnic group, it was the *nkaa-mbog* who spoke for the tribe.

The general picture of the paradigm of authority among the Basaa people is as follows: *ba-mbombog* comprised the people’s assembly – what we have termed “*likoda li-mbog*” which was presided over by the *nkaa-mbog* during nation-wide congregations and by the *mbombog* when the meeting assembled a single tribe [a number of houses]. Authentic participants arose from among the *ngweles* [of noble birth, not of mixed blood], the landed nobility. A senior dignitary [the *nkaa-mbog*, *mbombog*, *hikoo mbog*, and such other] must be *ngweles*, in the direct line of descent from the founder of his group. Otherwise, the *ngem nkog* [half-pure blood] in secondary functions would be *appendages* of members of the main assembly. By virtue of this, in the council of *ba-mbombog* or *likoda li-mbog* the elected participant sat with a deliberative voice. To this effect, by virtue of the status of his lineage, of his tribe, of his ethnic group or of the Basaa nation, he was the depository of power. At each of these three levels, he was the personification of *mbog*.

“*Mbog*” as it is related to “*likoda li-mbog*,” relates to some sort of a confraternity – that of *ba-mbombog*. In this instance, we make a distinction between associations whose bases in addition to kinship include initiation into the traditions of named families, and confraternal entities like *um*, *nge* or *koo*.<sup>12</sup> Recruitment into the latter category of associations is usually by co-optation and its members may have or may not have kinship ties. *Ba-mbombog* considered customary interdictions and the voting of laws. They could modify customs according to perceived trends in the evolution of society.

Apart from the nine grand patriarchs whom we consider as primal and who may be assimilated with the divinities of the Basaa pantheon, there are five names of ethnarchs<sup>13</sup> to whom all Basaa groups of various parts of the forests of Babimbi [the purported original homeland] and abroad refer themselves. Seemingly anarchical, their

institutions [in their customs] acknowledge the following dignitaries emerging from the lineages as the head of the “state” at each level. The concept of the “state” implied here is that of a territorial apparatus with the capacity to ensure the domination of a central authority on every organisation and person under its jurisdiction.

At the level of the *lorj* or of the entire ethnic group, the *ba-mbombog* were supreme chiefs, members of *nge* into which all their members were initiates. *Ba-podol* were heads of tribes at the level of the community as mandatories of the people at *likoda li-mbog*. Sovereignty was the prerogative of only citizens. Its exercise took place in an assembly – at meetings. These *meetings* were the main institutions for power adjudication. At various levels and at the level of the entire group, they were the supreme political organ.

Usually, a competent member of the folk called a meeting: the *nkaa-mbog* with the assistance of his staff – the *dikoo di mbog* – called a meeting, stating the place where the meeting would hold and at times, the specific purpose for which it was called. Night time was the time when the most important decisions are usually made. For these meetings, there used to be an even etiquette, a splendid display, an appropriate vicinity, and such other things. For appreciation, it is expressly mentioned in the charter [*Malombla ma-Mbog iKoba ni Kwan*] that: “its main role will be to perpetuate the race and to heed tradition. Every decision, interdiction, legislation, will be heeded and observed as the shared patrimony of the people” (Wonyu, 1975).

We have considered how the assembly and the hierarchies within arise: in addition to the main participants in these meetings, there were also a professional corps of *ba-gwegwet* [warriors], *ba-ndjelndjel* [diplomats] and *ba-legele njwin* [those who bore and spread information]. Women or slaves and strangers did not attend these meetings. The precaution against them was mostly to spare them of the presence of *nge* which of necessity was always in attendance. In the presence of *nge*, being a privileged witness of *ba-isogol isogol*, important decisions were made. Each *mbombog* was usually accompanied by a number of his own grown up “sons,” or of his brothers. Before he went to a meeting, every summoned dignitary consulted *ngambi* [an oracle] from which he acquired wisdom regarding the past, the present and the future. The Basaa people believe that the dead and Ancestors are under the ground. They think that the Ancestors can transmit their messages to the living folk through the intermediary of a being which equally lives under the ground. This intermediary being is known as “*ngambi hisi*” [the tarantula which lives under the ground].

To get the Ancestors involved in one’s action, in one’s cause, a man must consult the *ngambi*. To be efficient in the present as well as in future, he would refer to the *ngambi*.

<sup>12</sup>Women secret society among the Basaa people.

<sup>13</sup>Ntomb, Bakei, Jol, U and Sop are affirmed to have descended from the seventh ancestor of the original nine who emerged from the Grotto (Wonyu, 1975: 16).

Meetings were held mostly at crossroads,<sup>14</sup> under some totemic tree. It was not allowed to engage in intimate sexual acts in the vicinity of such a place, for there was always the risk of an encounter with *nge*. This would be quite a misfortune to the non-initiate especially, who had no right to acquaintance with the outer aspects of *nge*, not to talk of acquaintance with *nge* herself.

In the community itself the *bot ba nge*<sup>15</sup> ensured that the community heeded morality and *nge* made occasional punitive outings in the night. If it occurred that anyone got killed in such a night, it was simply explained that “*nge* had eaten him up.” Not even members of the confraternity themselves broke the “law”: a member who broke the law was very severely punished, perhaps more severely than non-initiates. We would enjoin the reader to appreciate Balandier’s remarks in this regard. Power is said to be ambiguous. The holder himself is dominated and so his domination over his subjects is restricted. It confers the capability to manipulate forces, but a misuse can lead to violence and to disorder. It is beyond society, but equally is it an important determinant of inequality and the hierarchies according to which society is constituted (Balandier, 1978).

The first day of the assembly was for the *bibanj* [rites of purification]. The *ngambi* priest brought a bunch of *sua toj* [the premature yellowish leaves of the palm tree], wine, fruits of a tree called “*tu njog*.” Each elder [*mbombog*] came with his *bot mbog*, and his *mbenda* [three-legged stool] on which he sat to say the *mbe*n [law]. Warriors hoisted straps of the skin of the panther, priests of divers cults hoisted either the feathers of the falcon or of the parrot; the *ba-mbombog* bore their *bakola* [elephant teeth worked into a necklace], in addition to other objects which attest to their position of eminence. The most senior man of the group was remarkable through his possession of either a *djai li-mbog* (displayed), or a *pa-nsoj* [a special lance].

Well before the solemn meeting, the *nkaa-mbog* and his collaborators met on the evening before, to specify the issues which were going to be considered at the real meeting. The list of the issues as it turned out to be is called “*nkaa bikumbi*.” “*Nkaa*” in the term stands for “prosecution” of a claim, a judgement; “*bikumbi*” [plural of *kumba*] in this case designates the main piece of the domain of the host *mbombog*.

Matters which were considered were often of murder, breaches of tribal law or of a custom, misdemeanours, negotiations with other tribes on extra-territorial issues, successions, the sending of missions to other tribes, the fixing of boundaries of communal lands, and such others. Thus, after a ritual of purification on the first day, where

the role of the priests was crucial to beseech for the endorsement of *ba isogol-isogol* so that no unfortunate accidents befell the people, the *nkaa-mbog* stated the issues which would be considered during the session. The statement could go on for a long time: this depended on the extensiveness of the issues to be considered.

During what can be termed the plenary session, every summoned dignitary had the right to speech. One could approve what he heard or disagree with an expressed position on an issue while he expressed his point of view and this he could do as often as he wished, repeating parts of his speech for emphasis. In a people’s assembly as much as one can, everyone speaks to support what seems to him to be pertinent, but this can only be taken to be so to the extent where others, in expressing their own views agree with everyone else. In the case of a prosecution, it was not he alone or they alone who stood accused or were involved in a dispute who were apostrophised: a trial interpellated those involved aside, anyone who came to hear of it. In principle everyone in the jury wished to salvage the accused person, and the unwritten law. As a result, the accusing party and the accused were given the opportunity to in turns express themselves. When the case went on, even individuals who were not scheduled to intervene were heard. A stranger among the jury, even if he understood Basaa [language] might not be able to figure out who stood accused; he would listen to various positions and would form a personal opinion on the matter; he might even be given the opportunity to take a turn or a number of turns to say his consideration of the issues under examination, his knowledge and experience on similar matters. It was only at the end that he would indicate his alien status. *A priori*, everyone present took an active part.

In the end, the most senior in age in the assembly or some collaborator of his of some reasonable age would stand up and give the final statement. Prior to this final statement, he would have been apprised on the position of the majority and would make an effort to get the opposing parties rallied to this final statement. Sometimes, if the final statement was disputed by the person who stood accused or by the accusing party because some element of information was lacking, or was not well interpreted, the whole question would be reviewed and the final statement revised in session. At this stage, the role of the most senior person in age is crucial and he must be the one to give the final statement himself. His strictly personal view remains secondary though: he cannot drive his own point of view through by sheer imposition. His uses clear and reasoned argument. His point of view would be tested, judged, weighed and weighted before it would rally people and why not, everyone present. It is a general observation that can be made of a typical Basaa man: a typical Basaa man is a hater of the misty, abhorrent of coercion and an enthusiast of justice.

<sup>14</sup>The crossroads plays a very important role in Basaa religion: apart from its role as the place where offerings to spirits are made, it is the place for convergence [scheduled meetings], the place from where news spreads, and the place at which various intelligences are pooled.

<sup>15</sup>The confraternity associated with the deity.

Thus was it the assembly which determined the worth and the weight of the patriarch. It may arise that the patriarch was unable to rally everyone. When this was the case, he revised his position after having listened to every objection and got them examined by everyone. If there was just one individual who remained beyond the rally, the latter would, out of deference to the patriarch and to the law, oblige. In no condition would he take the patriarch to task for his moral honesty and his devotion to the community is without any flaw.

The final statement was the result of a negotiation in which each individual conceded as much as it was conceded to him, so that the final decision appeared to everyone as a collective as well as a personal victory. It was the reason why the individual adhered to and defended the final statement, once it is arrived at.

It may arise that in a situation of conflict within a tribe some think that a solution would be for the stronger party to simply crush the less strong, and be done with it once and for all. This would be outlandish in terms of Basaa lore. In Basaa mythology one finds a dialogue between purported ancestors in which the wisdom of such an approach is questioned: an ancestor had suggested that the offspring of the villain *Mōde Sop* be wiped out (Mboui, 1967: 322). Another retorted that this was unwise for later generations would never know that there had once been such a villain in the land. In this regard, the practical sense of the Basaa people belabours a basic truism: the paradox of leadership with no people to be led.

Excepting when he had to break the speech of an unduly talkative *mbombog*, during the debates, the *nkaa-mbog* was for most of the time effaced: he would not say his point of view or his appraisal of ongoing discussions. This he did at the moment of decision: his own exposition would subsume all the positions expressed before even after several days of deliberation for at every pulse in the debates, he consulted with the other summoned dignitaries. Diviners among them told him the wisdom of the *ba isogol-isogol*. When it was the time for him to speak, he stood up, his *djai li-mbog* in hand, gave a sweep in the space immediate in his face; stillness of the assistance and solemnity followed. With the most reassuring voice he took up every point at issue, explaining this point now, then, the other, according to the nature of the case and in the end, with plenty of the use of anecdotes and proverbs, gave the verdict in the case of the prosecution of a claim, and the final statement in the case of a new legislative measure to be added to the armoury of existing laws.

Issues of disagreements are normally settled not by an appeal to authority, by display of power, or by confrontational debates but by long, patient discussion. A simple majority decision does not settle a matter comfortably: consensus is necessary and unanimous agreement is desired. This unanimous and public approval gave the final statement its operative force, and

anyone who persisted in non-acknowledgement beyond this event pitted himself against *mbog*. In effect he was on the outside of the law and of the “state” so to speak.

The *mbombog* kept everyone informed on decisions and ordinances made at meetings. He despatched *bandjelndjel* to *ba-mbombog* of other tribes. Bound by pledges, he was a depository of the customs and rites and was watchful that nothing changed or perturbed general social order: he would not undermine his group.

The dispensation of the *mbombog* was not given to extortion, nor were there instituted taxes. At most, the *mbombog* was content to organise for his own benefits, the industry of his wives and “sons” in the general sense of the term. But for sittings, people made gifts to the *mbombog* according to how they wished. His rule was not based on grabbing things. He took land or any other item for issues which were brought to him for sorting.

Among the privileges accorded to him, we would mention ritual gifts. When an animal was killed during a hunt, the *mbombog* had to be given a share of it: equally was he entitled to the calf of the pig and to some of the products of fishing and farming. This was justified by the *mbombog*'s obligation to ensure that the community's relations with the *bakugi* [Spirits, Ancestors] are good. Otherwise, the flesh of reptiles – big lizards and various species of snakes – were reserved for family heads and *mi man mi bot*. A young man would partake in the eating of the flesh of these animals only after he must have made a first *prestation* to these persons as a gesture of homage.

Whenever the *nkaa-mbog* for some reason could not exercise his mandate [could not attend a meeting] he delegated his powers to a *hikoo mbog* [plural: *dikoo di mbog*] by giving him his *djai*. The latter could sit in the assembly or council with the title of *mpodol*. In the case of death, if the proxy proved to be sufficiently knowledgeable, a brilliant speaker and was capable of offering feasts [*ndumbi*]<sup>16</sup>, he was co-opted to take the place of the late *mbombog*. Otherwise, the *mbombog* always had a homologue [an acolyte of sorts] who sometimes exercised religious functions, and at other times exercised secular and other divers functions. Sometimes this homologue was chosen from a junior branch to counterbalance the power of the *mbombog* and to in advance, check eventual misuse of authority. The homologue possessed *makan* [what we would call a “theurgical technique”]. Some times he was also a *mut ngambi*. This dual structure of power may be observed at all levels. It used to be more marked, despite deceptive appearances, at the level of the lineage in which the *hikoo mbog* worked with the *mbombog* to ensure serenity in the mystical sense, control over shared belongings, protection of material and moral security, symbols of cohesion within the kinship and political unit.

<sup>16</sup>Rites and feast related to the proper burial of a citizen

If the *mbombog* enjoys an authority which is acknowledged and accepted by the group, it is because he is in possession of knowledge of the origins, the location of power and of the Ancestors. To know and be master of the world, one needs to possess knowledge of one's origins and to ensure for one's self, the protection of the ancestors.

The immensity of the task of the *mbombog* we indicate here should not mislead as to the exact interpretations of his diverse roles. For clarity, we replace the *mbombog* in his status of *ngweles*. Free and noble by birth, the *mbombog* is no other than the individual with the rank of citizen in the "modern" state. When a *mbombog*, designated by his tribe, sat in an assembly, his capacity was that of *mpodol*. In this assembly he accomplished a political duty the purpose of which was legislative. This *mbombog* is called "*mpodol mbog*."

Otherwise, the role of the *mbombog*, that of guarantor of social harmony is of the domain of morality and arises from religious sentiment. In any organised society with acknowledged laws, anyone who intentionally breaks the law deserves a penalty. For the purpose of equilibrium, every good organisation needs a body of magistrates who say what is lawful, interpret the law in the sense of harmony, and social cohesion thanks to which all citizens are assured of a peaceful and quiet life. To this effect, it is incumbent on the group to determine who of its sons would be given this heavy duty – the dispensation of impartial and equitable justice. This task was entrusted to men of religion because it was only they who were capable of contact with religious forces. The stranger, for not being initiated into *mbog* would not be an appropriate choice for this role. *Nken mut a nyi be makanda ma ndjel* [the stranger does not know the crossroads], the Basaa people would say.

It is only people of noble birth, in the context of an organisation which cannot be open to non-initiates and strangers, who are called to sit in it. They participate in a double capacity, namely, their birth, and their knowledge as a result of having been initiated into the mysteries of cults of certain divinities.

The *mbombog* of this category who manipulates forces of the beyond is much well placed to dispense justice. Thus, as a *mut mbog* or *mbombog* or citizen, free and noble, he participates in the council of adepts of *um* if it is proven that he has acquired the merit through the rite of *likob-um*. The *mbombog* here is a *nkees mbog*, he who renders justice in the name of the people.

It was the role of the *nkaa-mbog*, the chief among dignitaries, who was entrusted to apply either *ma'mben* [laws], *matinj* [ordinances and edicts] or decisions of *bakees* [judges]. The multiple role of this important dignitary, seen from our statement, enables us to say that, for one to accede to this position, he had to be a summity of knowledgeability, an erudite in the matter of *mbog*. Nothing, be it of the domain of the laws or of the

sacred was beyond his competence.

The authority of the *mbombog* is not attained by force: it is attained in bits though initiation into the lore of the community, Basaa lore. Physical strength, or wealth do not confer authority to anyone. It is the community which gives power. The function of the *mbombog* cannot be improvised. By giving authority to the *mbombog* the community, in the act, acknowledges that it is not alone in its action; it is in communion with the Ancestors, especially the first of the Ancestors from whom the power derives. The latter is defined thus as sacred commandment which comes from the Ancestors, but controlled and managed by and for the community. Deriving from this fact, the *mbombog* instituted by the community is the depository and the manager of this authority in the place of and in the interest of the very community.

As a matter of fact, in the process of initiation he acquired as if by enchantment, knowledge of the origin, history and of the "content" of *mbog*. Ordinarily, these are held in great secrecy against the non-initiated. It was about the genesis, history and development of *mbog* understood in all its meanings. The *mbombog* acquired total knowledge on the myth of the origin, the succession of generations of the people. The initiated man could narrate *mbog* and establish the genealogy of members of his tribe beginning from himself up to the twentieth generation or beyond, immediately anterior to his birth. It would not be a simple narration of names: the initiated man also knew the places and related epochs when these personages lived, difficulties and conflicts of the times, and how crises were dealt with. This knowledge of the *mbombog*'s was ideological in import. The Basaa people say:

*Pod mbog* [say *mbog*]

*Semel mbog* (*kan mbog*) [proclaim *mbog*]

"Those who *know* not of the lands they have inhabited, those who *know* not of all their fathers, nor of their mothers who brought them to light, neither of the rivers of the lands." These sorts of phrases made with anacolutha, syllepses and other dissymmetry and suspense frequently figure in *jomol* [staged disputation: mutual trading off of guarded insults between rivals who cannot trade off physical or other blows].

The English terms for the terms "*semel*," and "*kan*" are "decide on a disagreement," and "split" respectively. In figures of speech we would say "sort out," and "distinguish." For the ordinary Basaa man, it was the *mbombog* who sorted out things of the world and set the order that was. He could do this because of his *knowledgeability*. The pertinence of his knowledgeability on the specific issue of genealogies cannot be overemphasised. Peace was always under threat when it seemed to exist, but when it was lost, patiently, assisted

by men of wisdom in a given locality, the *mbombog* gave himself the duty to bring it back. The *mbombog* looked into any matter, which could cause hatred and feuding in the community. He sorted out matrimonial matters and matters of domains. His competence in these matters arose from his *knowledge of the genealogy* of his group. Knowledge of the genealogy of the group enabled the *mbombog* to educate houses on probable matrimonial relationships and on clan lands. There is the saying among the Basaa people that “*mbai yon i ye i son ison*” [home is where the tomb of one’s father is found]. No one would claim land beyond this vicinity. The sale of land was unknown [inexistent] for land was the property of the community as a whole. Land claims or disagreement on boundaries when they arose involved two houses, not two individuals.

It was the *mbombog* who in his capacity of witness knew which ancestor of two houses was the first to be in possession of the land: perhaps that one of the ancestors was just a provider of servants for the other.

In one oral tradition, Maṅal *ma-Mban*, some sort of demiurge who put an end to the reign of *Mode Sop* is said to have issued the *djai li-mbog* (Mboui, 1967). When the *mbombog* spoke in an assembly, he always had it in his hand. As *mbog* took him back to the source, to the origin, which concerned everything, equally, the *mbombog* was not in the service of any particular individuals. His essence was bound to *meetings* where his speech rightly held, to replenish the entire group in life and resources. The *mbombog* was the man of the word, and of the living word.

In the part of the universe in which the *mbombog* was sovereign, as the man of the word, he was always on the move. Perpetually, he was summoned to settle the most serious of disputes. Here and now he was solicited to resolve a problem of marriage between two individuals to ensure that no related taboo was flouted; in this case his knowledge on genealogy was crucial for *the ban on incest among the Basaa people is a categorical imperative*. Elsewhere and then he had to settle disputes over inheritance between brothers who arose from different *kishin*. Elsewhere still, and at some other time, he would be waited upon to deal with a murder, an accusation of witchcraft and sorcery, the victim having been poisoned or killed by an evil spell-worker, that is to say, an individual with an evil *hu*.<sup>17</sup> It takes an inquiry to find the person who is responsible. The *njek* [the ritual for vengeance] may be resorted to but the *mbombog* who is a man of life and not of the opposite would endeavour to punish the person responsible keeping him alive as far as possible and such other events.

The pacificatory action of the *mbombog* made of him a venerated individual among his folk. He was greeted with deference. Everyone was submissive towards him, not

exclusively because of his secular power, but because he embodied the sacred which was *facinans tremendum*: a man people feared, a man people would not quarrel with – his speech evoked awe for he never speaks in vain. Particularly when he spoke with his *djai* in hand, he would give a benediction to the valorous son, as well as his speech would constitute a curse to the unredeemable felon. Especially, a *mbombog* would not lose his poise to the extent where he was moved to designate an individual with his finger or with his head, or with his *djai* for these specific acts, posed by a *mbombog* would be a curse. What follow this act of the *mbombog*’s could be dramatic. It would for instance abort a pregnancy or cause sterility in a woman. Even flora would be similarly affected. In the extreme, the designated individual would instantly catch a mysterious sickness [which cannot be diagnosed in western medical expertise and with a single prognosis, namely, death] and within a short period waste away and die. The import and effect would be the same if a *mbombog* “*a hom liuub i si tij*” [sat down with a crash of his buttocks, in his seat]. These are the limits beyond which the *mbombog* never strayed: even in the extreme of circumstances when some individual, in a rage, gave the *mbombog* a thrashing, the latter would restrain himself and not say a curse if he recognised his face and knew him among the folk over whom he was sovereign. He would say a curse on him in the event where he was not known, and was a stranger: the *mbombog* hoped to bring the known miscreant if he was of his territory, under control, whereas the stranger if he escaped would be a wrong [an unacceptable] example for the rest of the community, and a continuing disruption.

A notable activity of the *mbombog*’s was the celebration and the presiding of ceremonies of the *isai*. Almost always, the *isai* concerned an individual who was in distress in his body or who thought that he was the victim of malediction which was obstructing his success in life. In this event the entire community was summoned and everyone in turn, according to the case said the reason for his grudge against the victim. He then declared that he no more nursed the grudge and wished good fortune for the *victim*. But if he believed that he had been molested in his rights, he would ask for reparation against his renunciation of his grudge. It was exacted that everyone who confessed his ungainly disposition towards him end his confession with the words: “if it is because of this that the victim suffered, I no more have any grudge against him. Let him be relieved of ill luck and be happy.” In any case even if the *victim* was at fault, the assistance wished him good fortunes, and it was considered that by his condition he had expiated his error. It was mandatory for every member of the community who nursed some grudge against the *victim* to be present during this ceremony. Otherwise, he ran the risk of benediction that the community through the *mbombog* gave to the *victim* being turned against him. In the Old Basaa [*Mbog Basaa*

<sup>17</sup>Mysterious inner power.

*ni Mpo'o*], in the case where the society was struck by a scourge [an epidemic or a close succession of deaths, a drought and poor harvests, a flood and the likes], the *mbombog* organised the ceremony of the *nge* properly speaking.

It was the duty of the *mbombog* to conjure away ills which might come to the territory, combat invisible and mysterious presences of *panther-men* and brigands, prohibit the entry of some categories of sick persons who would spread dangerous and contagious diseases. Working with members of *nge*, the latter assisted him in such matters. In the name of the *mbombog*, they were empowered to chase away from the land anyone on whom the verdict of exile had been pronounced, a sick foreigner or even to kill a rebellious murderer.

Lastly, the *mbombog* or more precisely the entire set of *ba-mbombog* of a region reserved for themselves, the right to declare the beginning or the end of war against another ethnic group [never did a *mbombog* conduct a war against another Basaa group]. The *mbombog*, thus possesses a sacred and effective power which enables him to guide his community.

The *cursus* of *mbog* greatly informs on the “political” organisation of the Basaa people. The main role of the *mbombog* was to govern. The people were governed by heads of clans, heads accepted by this same people who through initiation became sacred and for life. They were the *ba-mbombog*.

At the head of each family we had the initiate into *ndombol kembe* who governed at the level of the immediate “family” comprising of about ten homes. The sense of the term “family” intended here is not that of a couple and their offspring. It would comprise of the homes of brothers, their sons, and sons of brothers of the initiate’s father. Women were not included since they left to found their homes in marriage into other tribes.

The initiate into the second level or into the third level of *mbog* had the right to oversee in the territory of the head who had been initiated into *ndombol kembe* and no more. He could interpellate him in the position of an eminent personality in the clan. Equally, the *mbombog* of a higher grade would reprimand an initiate into the third level of *mbog* for letting a critical situation to decay: land dispute for instance between a Basaa man and a member of a *foreign* tribe. The lower level initiate had to resolve the conflict or if he encountered difficulties, called other *ba-mbombog*. However, a higher-level *mbombog* would not unduly nose into the affairs of another *mbombog* of a lower level, in his absence or without being invited. “*Mbog i yap be lep*,” as the Basaa people say, to indicate limits between domains as rivers indicate boundary lines between territories.

A *mbombog* to begin with, was the head of a house, and then, according to his level of initiation into *mbog*, head of a clan, and a head in the collegiate of *ba-mbombog* of the land of the Basaa people. The higher

the level of *mbog* into which an individual was initiated, the more extended was his power to command, and the less however was he responsible in the structures at the base. Excepting the rights to veto and to consecrate another *mbombog*, the *ba-mbombog* individually, played the same role. The right of veto was reserved for the [fifth level] *mbombog* who could also consecrate another *mbombog* in the presence [obligatory] of at least one other *mbombog*.

The *ba-mbombog* of all Basaa clans are thus solidary, participating in the same hierarchical structure the ones below the others according to the various levels of *mbog* into which they were initiated. In the case of the end of a war, the most senior *mbombog* signed the peace treaty – *tug gwet* – to indicate that the contention was over, and settled.

## Theoretical discourse

### The world-view of a people

The coexistence of large numbers of men in society presupposes a belief that they have, in some degree a shared and intersubjective world about which they can communicate. Unless there is a common historical bond of cultural beliefs and ideals which may serve as a guide to conduct and as tradition to be upheld, a society or a state ceases to function effectively and drifts into anarchy (Bidney, 1967). In Parsons’ idealised social system he talks of “shared value standards, regarding what is, what is nice, and what is good” – that is, standards regarding the cognitive, cathectic and evaluative aspects of an individual’s orientation to the world (Parsons, 1951). For Parsons, the most important processes are the communication of meaning, of symbols and of information. Habermas (1973) would refer to an *organisationsprinzip* [a fundamental principle of organisation] which delimits in the abstract the possibilities for alterations of social states, and from a life-world perspective; he thematises a group’s steering mechanism [values and institutions]. Events and states are analysed from the point of view of their dependency on functions of integration and pattern maintenance. Vico<sup>18</sup> referred to the “civic world” which exists in terms of actions, thoughts, religious beliefs, myths, and norms and institutions. Weber (1968) referred to an “order,” a “structure of dominancy” which is regarded as in some way obligatory or exemplary for him. The order presents features of a scene to which the actor orients his action. In any given polity, power would be embedded in such a thing – a “situation of dominancy.” Without exception, any sphere of social action is profoundly influenced by structures of dominancy. When Althusser (1971) considers

<sup>18</sup>Cf. BERLIN, I. (1969).

how capitalism as a system is perpetuated and why it functions as a society, he conceives social relations as totalities, as a whole governed by a *single determinative principle*. From his concept of “Ideological State Apparatuses,” he argued that “ideology” is an inevitable component of any social totality.

“The world” is the broadest environment that is cognitively, practically and emotionally relevant. We thus talk about “the world” in which we live, “the *Lebenswelt*.” This “world” can differ, depending on the form of social life that we consider. We can therefore speak of “the world of the Antiquity” or “the world of the Basaa people.” “The world” would not be identified with the earth, nor with “the observable universe” but with the totality in which we live and to which we can relate ourselves in a meaningful way.

Societies as well as individuals have always contemplated deep questions relating to their being and becoming, and of the world. The configurations of answers to these questions form their world-views.

World-views encapsulate circulated “meanings,” types of behaviour which are passed on from generation to generation, socio-political problems which arise, styles of art and such and other events. They arise from people’s experiences and practical dealings with things, as well as from their interpretations of history and of scientific knowledge of the world. For this reason they are not congealed entities or copies of the world, but somehow, they try to capture as much as possible, all aspects of given worlds.

Subjects capable of speaking and acting can develop the unity of their person only in connection with identity-securing world-views and moral systems. The unity of the person requires the unity-enhancing perspective of a life-world that guarantees order and has both cognitive and moral-practical significance.

The fundamental function of world-maintaining interpretative systems is the avoidance of chaos. The legitimisation of the order of authority and basic norms can be understood as a specialisation of this “meaning-giving” function.

The amounts of meaning [worthiness] in the life of a people are a function of the extent to which they are aware of the central components of a given world-view. Subjects capable of speaking and acting can develop the unity of their person only in connection with identity-securing world-views and moral systems. The unity of the person requires the unity-enhancing perspective of a life-world that guarantees order and has both cognitive and moral-practical significance.

In the domain of power the pertinence of a world-view would be indicated by the extent of fit between the spirit of the latter and power as it is conceived among a people and the ensuing system of authority. Social categories as may arise among a people and relations related to power differentials always reflect the traditions of a people.

However, the congruence between the spirit of a world-view and the total life of a people is a function of the relevance of the latter in real life situations. It would be sensible to talk of a continuum in the extent to which a world-view actually grips the behaviour<sup>19</sup> of a people. The extremes would be the case of complete determination of the latter, and another of perhaps a total disconnection. Various events in the continuum would depict greater or lesser pattern [regularity] in relationships in general, and in power relations and political structure in particular. The path from a given individual to a Basaa man of stature in terms of knowledgeability in the mores and *usii* and in terms of an awareness of Basaanity in him is a necessary socialisation which in the ideal of instances would give a *mbombog* – a citizen, a typical Basaa man.

The central event in our scheme is the event of pattern – our term for order or regularity, and thus for stability and the possibility of systemic reproduction. The *mbombog* – situated at the apex of a peculiar system of hierarchy – is the paradigm *par excellence*, of pattern among the Basaa people.

We have just related data and some analysis on the social formation of the Basaa as a people. Our consideration was restricted to the specific domain of power. On occasion, we related the system of status roles, and processes by which individuals are educated into Basaa values and societal norms, Basaa institutions of social control, specifically political entities including power and authority relations, instances of decision making and resource mobilisation. Let us call all of this society’s steering mechanisms [the control centre]. When we named a cultural system, we termed it “*mbog*.” It cannot be over-emphasised: *mbog*, we opined, amounts to a sort of matrix within which the entire social formation is mapped – the tissue of the interstices of the fabric of society. Among the Basaa people, *mbog* assumes a super ordinate position *vis-à-vis* the socio-cultural system. In this study, it arises as a restraining discipline, a normative system, enculturation into which conditions the individual for reasoned relationships as the Basaa people conceive them.

Accordingly, as one would expect in an individual’s relationship with his society ordinarily, there is some degree of tension between an individual Basaa man and his society, between the egoistic impulses he would gratify and the altruistic ideals and social imperatives he acknowledges and is constrained to heed.

The well-organised community, as well as the well-governed state is one in which the interests of both the individual and the society are protected, the society recognising the individual’s personal rights to freedom and self-expression in action and in thought, while the individual identifies himself with his society and seeks to

<sup>19</sup>Amounts of a world-view that are involved in the organisation – on occasion in the political structure – of a people.

conform as far as possible, to its time-tested ideals and indispensable requirements.

Scheler (1970) had contended that hereditary functions exist for the acquiring of certain types of knowledge and that differences in the basic cultural mentalities in the world are based on inborn “talent.” For being closely related to the fundamental “organic” basis of the cultures they support, these basic cultural mentalities, these relatively “natural world-views” change only slowly over time.

Scheler used the term “group soul” to designate relatively “natural world-views.” Otherwise, it was the folksongs, folk-language, customs, mores and popular religions, and such other things of society. The group mind was built “on top” of, so to speak, the group soul. This other term meant “artificial constructions.” It designated sophisticated and systematised culture, the state, law, educated language, art and science, philosophy and such other things.

In context we consider *mbog* the Basaa group mind, and name the institution of *likoda li ba-mbombog* as their holders as opposed to folksongs, folk-language, customs, mores and popular religions which were impersonal and were the property of the entire social system. Let us like Durkheim say, collective habits – the basis of moral and legal rules, values, and aesthetic standards, political and religious beliefs embodied in collective representations are the manifestations of the group mind. They are thought to be the “surface” of reality, which is their ultimate foundation.

The continuing essence of *mbog* in Basaa social life would not be possible if it were not some sort of “reflection of reality.” We affirm that *mbog* is crucial to the substance of categories of understanding time, space, cause, thingness, personality, and such others – the most universal properties of things – by which all other things are located. It provides the “framework” of the posture of the Basaa man.

We would emphasize the importance of institutionalised moral controls which both derive from and orient the categories so that they become the means by which individuals internalise the moral authority of the group. One can thus speak of a moral necessity which underlies the categories for they perform a social control function as well as being agents for the transmission of knowledge. In the meaningful sense of the term, the categories provide a cosmology, a way for men to relate to and know the social universe in which they live: they provide the means by which the social community is maintained, and it follows that their development must depend on the possibility of social change within a society such as to affect [determine] the entire system of collective representations.

We have come to the end of our study. What we have done is a theoretically bracketed description of a people, their needs, and resources available to them and

institutions which have arisen from their activity. Let us call the institutions we described “the political instance of the Basaa social formation.” The detail of our description concerned relations between persons and groups as are suggested by differentials in amounts of power. Through the rendering of a central custom, here is a critical statement of the social organisation of [social order among] the Basaa people: a consideration of empirical givens of relations of power among the Basaa people in the purview of native notions of precedence and authority.

## GLOSSARY ON BASAA TERMS

*ba-mbombog* [consecrated representatives of the major branches of a lineage]  
*ndap* [units of rungs in a lineage away from the major lineages]  
*bum* [an inheritance unit]  
*ikoba* [mythical times]  
*injog bum* [head of the inheritance unit]  
*isai li ndombol* [of family religion, giving blessings]  
*isai mbog* [ritual purification of the land]  
*isaj* [father]  
*mbai* [of the house]  
*ngwal* [pater/genitor]  
*nkog* [of the territory]  
*nholos* [benefactor father]  
*nyegla* [father's heir]  
*isogol* [ancestor]  
*m'an* [a child named after the father of one's father]  
*-isogol* [differentiated ancestors]  
*kid bog* [upper level relation at five removes]  
*kumba* [some sort of men's house at which grown ups would assemble for social reasons and occasional air dispute]  
*lihaa* [minimal lineage]  
*liten* [maximal lineage]  
*li Basaa* [Basaa tribes]  
*log* [the land in the sense of a polity]  
*ma'nyaj* [brother]  
*majo* [upper level relation at four removes]  
*manj mut* [the most senior man in a house or homestead]  
*mbai* [house in the sense of an inheritance unit]  
*mi manj mi bot* [grownups]  
*mpodol* [spokesman]  
*munlom* [male/man]  
*mut* [human being]  
*ndandii* [upper level relation at three removes]  
*ndap* [house, the physical thing]  
*ndombol likil* [consecration of a marriage]  
*ngo-*, *ngond* [daughter of, girl]  
*nkog hisi* [the universe]  
*nyaj mbai* [senior wife]  
*nyogol* [mother of one's spouse]



*nyu'u mut* [the human body]  
*nhunug mut* [aged man]  
*nhenel loŋ* [ruler]  
*hwaa* [wife]  
*hwet mbai* [lord of the home]  
*soŋ* [tomb, sepulchre]  
*yum* [*ad hoc* voluntary association for momentary group enterprises like clearing a bush]

### Notes on the pronunciation of Basaa terms

Symbols Used	International Symbols
ɔ	[saw]
o	[no]
ɒ/ŋ	ŋ [riŋg]
e	e [bɛd]
e	ei [ei]
a	a: [am]
ai	ai [my]

### LIST OF INFORMANTS

1. *ngo*-Bayemi Pauline
2. Leba Mbelek
3. Matemb *ma*-Mbelek
4. Kaal Nkam
5. Hans Banyuge

**ngo-Bayemi** Pauline is the wife of Leba Mbelek. She is of the descent of one of the founding families among the log-Basangen. Our choice of this woman as an informant is by chance: we are an offspring of the father of the father of her husband who happens to be the father of the mother of our mother. It was in the *bum* of the latter that we resided for the longest period during our peregrinations among the Basaa people of the country, for the purpose of data collection. She was not literate and her grasp of French [language] is very approximative.

**Mbelek** is of a monagtic descent, that is, the offspring of a girl-mother: a *m'an nɛm nkɔŋ* among the *log* Ott. He used to serve as a functionary in the old railway cooperation, REGIFERCAM and after the cooperation was compressed due to economic crunch of the late 1980s, he relocated from the city to his place of birth.

**Matemb ma-Mbelek** is a citizen among the *baKembe* tribe. He is a very old man among the Basaa people when the life expectancy is well below 58 years supposed to be the life expectancy in modern Cameroon. He has been living in the country without ever again going to the city since he was appointed the councillor for Bum'anga on the late 1970s. In our reckoning, because of his age, we figured that he was an authoritative source on what the old society used to be before even the colonial era.

**Kaal Nkam** is another autochthon among the *baKembe* of Bum'anga. For an extended period, he was obliged to move away from the country fleeing pre-independence repression of Cameroonian independence movement opposed to French control of Cameroon in the 1950s. Kaal Nkam was a direct agnate of ours and supposedly the oldest member of the lineage with which we would be identified among the *baKembe* tribe. He readily commented submissions in our audio recorded conversations. More so we relied on him for correction of some of our notes for he spoke Pidgin English very well. When we had doubts of the meaning of any Basaa expression or on the interpretation of any folk item, he rendered them into plain Basaa and into Pidgin English.

**Hans Banyuge** replaced Matemb *ma*-Mbelek as the State's councillor for Bum'anga. This last of our main informants was rather young with considerable experience of urban life. He readily figured out our difficulties in interpretations and, in contrasts between city inclinations and the "Basaa way," he adeptly managed folk reticences on many issues which arose in our conversations to encourage folk in continued participation in the conversations. He spoke good French and we spoke a lot.

### RANGE OF CONVERSATIONS [THEMES]

1. Knowledge on the origin of the Basaa people
  - oral traditions
  - o on Ngog Lituba
  - o of Basaa people in general
  - o of specific Basaa *tribes*
  - o on family religions
  - Spirit [Ancestor] Worship
  - dealing with the Dead
2. *Mbog*
  - Basaa concepts on things of nature
  - Basaa concepts on the universe
  - The Basaa concept of man in the universe
  - Basaa concepts which relate to dimensions of the human person
  - On the statuses of categories of persons
    - o a man
    - o a woman
    - o a child
    - o a wife
3. Customs centred on the basic life crises towards the status of the citizen
  - the conception and the birth of a child
  - the naming of the child
  - the circumcision of the male child
  - meetings on betrothal
  - the onset of marriage
  - o the truth test for the girl child
  - o the education of the wife to be
  - o the status of the wife
4. Basaa kinship

- and identity
- and concepts of inclusion and of citizenship
- and terms of address and attended behaviours and postures
- and avoidances, prohibited categories and tabooed persons
- and avuncular relationships
- 5. Succession
  - Customs of blessings
  - o of individual homes
  - o of specific inheritance units
  - o of entire tribes
- 6. Political positions
  - *isaŋ mbai*
  - *isaŋ nkōŋ*
  - the *ba-mbombog*
  - meetings
  - o at the level of minimal lineages or families [*boma*]
  - o at the level of maximal lineages or houses [*makōd*]
    - o *likōda li-mbog*
- 7. The *mbombog*
  - eligibility
  - choosing one
  - initiation and consecration
  - the personality of the *mbombog*
  - the prerogatives of the *mbombog*
  - o the condition of the Basaa woman
    - eligibility for the position of the bearer of blessings, and consecration in a given inheritance unit
- 8. The Basaa people and neighbouring peoples
  - knowledge among the Basaa people of the existence of other people
  - knowledge among the Basaa people of other ways of looking at things and of doing things among other peoples.
- 9. Assorted themes
  - dealing with human remains and funerary rites
  - sororities and confraternities

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