

# **POWER AND THE ENVIRONMENT IN**

## **MOMI [VERE] SOCIETY**

**"With a heigh, ho, the wind and the rain"**

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## 1. Introduction

The northeast of Nigeria has remained extremely remote from its more developed regions until recently. This may well account for a remarkable adherence to traditional religion among some of the peoples who live there. Although Yola is an important centre of Islam and FulBe raiders penetrated the region extensively in the nineteenth century there has been limited conversion to Islam, presumably because of its association with slaving. The Catholic Holy Ghost Fathers have also been operating in the area for some time and many major settlements have a church. However, all forms of Christianity have had only a very limited impact, and remain superimposed on a wholly different belief structure which is still central to the society. This short account describes some part of the traditional belief systems of the Momi people, particularly in relation to rain-makers, notions of control over the elements and other types of supernatural power, particularly witchcraft. Some of this material has been described from another perspective by Edwards (1991) and the present notes should be regarded as complementary. They are based on brief visits and should not be regarded as a definitive account.

## 2. Momi social structure

The Momi people of Northeastern Nigeria are usually called 'Ver[r]e' in the literature (e.g. Temple, 1922: 357 ff. & Meek, 1931). Recent research in the area has shown that this is a cover term that is applied to at least two distinct groups, the Momi and the Mom Jango whose locations are shown on Map 1. This paper<sup>1</sup> discusses the beliefs of the Momi of Yadim and the surrounding area.

The Momi are divided into eight clans -the Maarki, Ogi, Gberi, Togi, Toozi, Boy, Bay and Kobsufa. These were originally localised endogamous groups but intermarriage has become more common in recent years. In addition, there is a more strictly endogamous group, the Tibaye, who are blacksmiths. Apart from residence, clans are defined by the management of a ritual complex that includes circumcision, masquerades as well as specific types of material culture and musical forms.

A notable feature of Momi society is the presence of two types of marriage; 'small' and 'large' in local terms (Meek, 1931, 1:418). The principal difference between the two marriages is the amount of bride-price paid. In a 'small' marriage, fathers do not retain control of their children, who must leave after puberty for the compound of their mothers' brothers. Such marriages are liable to break up easily, and if the wife runs away she has the right to have her children with her. When a man becomes rich enough to perform the 'large' marriage he then accrues the right to retain the children in his own compound. This system has extensive ramifications in relation to ceremonial matters; for example, in a 'large' marriage, a father is responsible for the circumcision and initiation of his sons, whereas in a small marriage this falls to the mother's brother.

There is no overall centralised authority in Momi society; the clan is the highest level of organisation. Power is held by three individuals; the *ghanam gbare* or chief of the clan, the *ghan laze* or high priest and the *nor gbar* or 'eye of the clan' a sort of seer. Status in Momi society is publicly achieved by the giving of feasts, involving the distribution of beer and cooked food. A man will call such a feast, inviting one of the many types of musical group in the area. There is a large dance and then another of the 13 steps towards becoming a *Domda* is completed. The council of men who have acquired the title *Domda* is effectively the important decision-making group in any village.

Momi society presents a well-ordered image, but there are deep structural contradictions beneath its surface. Broadly speaking, events in the external world are attributed to an array of more or less hostile entities, both taking human form and in their own right. These are constantly conspiring to both kill human beings and destroy livelihood. Witches, *gongere*, are probably the single most powerful and dangerous group; in principle it is important for society that they be identified. Normally, witches cannot

be known until after their death, when two holes in their skull are observed. However, their identification and neutralisation can be achieved by individuals who have access to the techniques of sorcery and who are powerful enough to combat them. Each clan has such an individual called the *nor gbar*, literally, the 'eye of the clan', a sort of seer. The *nor gbar* is not thought of as a witch, although his behaviour may resemble witches. It is said that the present incumbent of the post selects boys during the circumcision period and rubs on their eyes a medicine to make hidden things visible.

Individuals are not necessarily destined to become witches; they must be inducted by a relative. Formerly, the boys did not go for circumcision until they were about fifteen, and could build and thatch a house alone in the bush. During their period of isolation, a slightly younger girl, preferably the sister of the boy, was assigned to cook for them. When they cooked for the boys, they had to leave out all salt, and only use green vegetables without meat. The pots had to be new pots which had not been used by the family for any other purpose. These girls did not sleep in the bush but separately, outside their normal compound. The girls usually subsequently married a member of the group of boys being circumcised.

This was the period of testing; both girls and boys might be offered human flesh by their mothers and fathers respectively. If they accepted it, they would then become witches. In the case where the boy's father had only undergone primary marriage, the boy would ultimately join the kin-group of the mother's brother. It would therefore be the mother's brother who inducted him into witchcraft.

### 3. Acquiring power

For the Momi, there is no real distinction between those elements classified as supernatural in Western thought and the everyday world of experience. Magical actions are constantly compared to everyday behaviour by way of illustration. Supernatural entities do not form a separate category from more everyday afflictions such as sickness and wounds caused by wild animals. For example, malaria is like money, a spirit that people store in a secret place in their house. It can appear in many forms; as oil, a stone or even a human being. The *toos* is an animal like a ram with the head of a human being. If someone is killed by a *toos*, then it will appear to be a wild animal. However, the master of the *toos* is compared to an armed robber causing tragedy for unspecified motives.

Society and individuals are constantly under threat from a variety of disruptive and hostile forces. The single most important manifestation of these is death. Apart from the case of an old man who lives alone with no relatives, all deaths are attributed to deliberate human causation, usually through the mediation of spiritual entities. Apart from death, climatic fluctuations and disease are the other phenomena with causes that must be diagnosed to prevent their exacerbation. The linked explanations offered are in a sense, very much functional; they account for quite specific phenomena, rather than cohering into an integrated cosmology.

Human death is caused by other individuals; in most cases these are thought to be relatives of the deceased. This is because in the struggle to accrue personal power, more can be gained from kin than from unrelated persons. The most common suspects for causing death by sorcery are elder brothers; these are, of course, the same people who usually become the *nor-gbar*.

Witchcraft is only one of the methods of acquiring power; however, Momi society offers a broad range of alternatives and probably most individuals would lay claim to a mixture of strategies. A simple method of accruing power is to control a spirit or other entity that can cause death or disease. More complex is the control of natural phenomena; rain, wind, disease and pools of water. These sources of power all become elements in the constant struggle to overcome those around you and to prevent sickness, death and crop failure.

## The Rain-maker

Momi society lacks any central authority; however, the single most important figure respected by all clans is the *Sas*, or rain-maker. His authority is also respected by the Pereba (Wom) and the Mom Jango and even the local FulBe regard him as *mawdo*, the important man. The principal rain-maker lives at Ragin, in a bush area south of the Mapeo road. However, he is reputed to have agents, *saara-sari*, in all the principal Momi villages who report on the state of the rain, among other things. Although the international border with Cameroun occasionally impedes communication, an agent has been placed at Tantili, on the border, to safeguard the interests of Momi in Cameroun.

Although the rain-maker is a central figure to Momi society, the tradition originally derived from the Bata people who live to the northwest of Yola, and who speak an unrelated Chadic language. The original *Sas* was known as **Domda Logbas** and came from Karin. He married two Momi women and from the offspring of the first marriage sprang the line of the rain-makers. The position of chief rainmaker has passed from father to son in direct succession. Since his time the rainmakers have been;

Domda Mudi  
Domda Yero  
Domda Jubole -the present incumbent.

This suggests that the actual institution of rain-maker may be of late nineteenth century origin.

There is a small round house, *mai sari*, in which the ceremonial apparatus of rain-making is kept. This house can only be entered once a week, on Wednesdays, by the rain-maker. In addition, there is a *buug*, a pile of stones, around which the ceremonies are focussed. To become an assistant it is necessary to undergo an induction ceremony. Any man over forty years old can be inducted, and boys over fifteen if they are from the family of the rain-maker. For the ceremony, the initiate must bring a black goat, a black gown and cap and seven pots of wine. The black gown is said to be related to the blackness of rain-clouds.

Once a year a major gathering of the rain-maker and his assistants takes place, usually in April or early May. This ceremony, a combination of prayers and the preparation of medicine, must be repeated if drought is persistent. The rain-maker must stay apart from women during the month of sacrifice. He is forbidden to eat all newly flushed crops, such as first fruits, new sprouts and the like.

Rain is sent from God, *Ula*; however, a variety of activities on earth can prevent its appearance. For example, if houses are not roofed on time, or delays in taking the first fruits of men's crops and inserting them in the thatch of the house. Fighting can also prevent rain if blood is shed, because blood and water are thought to be opposed to one another.

The other aspect of the rain-maker's power is his control over the principal diseases in the area. Measles, chicken-pox, scabies, eye-trouble and locust plagues are said to be kept in pots in the *mai-sari*, the rain-maker's shrine. The present *Sas* was unwilling to discuss this. However, it is widely believed that anyone with a grudge against a community may go to the rain-maker's compound and either buy or steal one of these pots. The scabies epidemic in Wom Kasa in January, 1986 and a subsequent measles epidemic were both said to be caused in this way. A curious corollary, however, is that such epidemics often result in subsequent good harvests.

The rain-maker, despite his powers over disease and his occasional withdrawal of rain for real or imagined slights, is essentially a benevolent figure. This is exemplified by the permanent battle against the keepers of rainbows. Rainbows are thought to be the 'enemies' of rain -it is said that when a rainbow

appears the rain will cease shortly afterwards. They are kept by people in their houses for magical purposes and it is possible to establish where rainbows are kept because they must be washed in pure rain-water. Washing them causes to steam to rise up, causing the physical phenomenon we observe as a rainbow. The need to dry them subsequently is responsible for the drought that may follow.

### The Clan of the Winds

The son of the Bata rain-maker's second marriage gave rise to the *zaga bokpi* or Kobsufa clan, who still live in the Vere hills. The Kobsufa are the controllers of the wind. Unlike the rain-makers, power over winds is vested in the entire clan rather than individual members. Wind is divided into three types; *pipz* 'breeze', *zaka* 'wind' and *zaka tus*. This last type of wind is said to be a spirit that can be raised. It holds knives and rips off the roofs of houses during the period of strong winds that often precede the first rains.

During circumcision the boys stay alone in the bush and live on bush fruits. This is conceived as a time of testing moral character; to prevent them from becoming lazy and fearful. If a boy accepts a meal of flesh from a witch-relative then the Kobsufa will come for him. After he returns they will train him and send him to the bush again. If he is able to raise a *zaka tus* successfully, then he will be accepted.

### Sacred Ponds

There are also sacred ponds, *ruza*, in the remote regions of Momi country, often at the foot of the hills where the villages used to be. Ownership of pools is transmitted patrilineally to chosen sons. The power accessible through ownership of such a pool means that the inheritor often becomes *ghanam-gbare*. If this is not possible then he will be appointed *ghan ləze*.

The pools are normally in quite isolated areas; however, they are fringed with rocks to signify their distinctiveness from ordinary pools. In the times when war between clans was still common, they were dredged of silt every year. It is normally forbidden to draw water from the *ruza* for ordinary household use, although someone walking in the bush who is thirsty may drink from them safely.

The water from these pools is an important ingredient in medicines for both witchcraft and war. If someone was wounded in a battle then the application of water from the *ruza* would help the wound to heal rapidly. Similarly, if seeds to be planted in the coming rainy season are washed in its water, then the yields will be increased. Particular snakes are said to inhabit the pools. After a period of time they become familiar with the owner and will visit him in his house at night. For this reason, snakes are never killed in the house, as they may be snakes from the sacred pond.

### Conclusion

Momi society has two separate hierarchies of status, the public one that involves taking a series of titles and ascending to *Domda*, and the concealed struggle for access to various types of power. This necessarily implies a rather bleak image of society, where individuals are constantly engaged in a struggle to cause death and misfortune to their neighbours. This view is rarely stated directly in conversation, but often emerges in the texts of songs which refer to the isolation of individuals and the untrustworthiness of immediate kin. External entities, such as disease and fluctuations in rainfall, can in some sense be mapped against the unreliability of other human beings. From this conception it is a short distance to their unification in explanations of extraordinary events.

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