

Chapter 3: Social, Ritual and Religious Aspects of Yamba Communal Hunts

Introduction

Hunting and hunting rituals have received little or no attention in the literature of the Western Grassfields of Cameroon. Hunting is mentioned mainly in connection with hunting lodges and their importance as political institutions (Dillon 1973 and 1990, Warnier 1975, Masquelier 1978), but its social, ritual and religious role in the life of the community has been largely ignored. Given the elaborate ritualization of the communal hunt it deserves to be treated in its own right, as I hope to show in the case of the Yamba. Moreover, the study of hunting and omen-taking rituals also reveals much about the belief system of a people.

The communal hunt among the Yamba, which was, and to the limited extent still is, practised, is more than a quest for food. As an important village activity in which all able-bodied men participated it was of great social, ritual and religious importance as well as an integral part of the Yamba economy. It fitted in with the annual cycle of economic activities such as the production of palm oil, farming, rearing of domestic animals, and palm wine tapping.

Before the arrival of Fulani cattle in the Yamba area game was plentiful. Large tracts of uninhabited grassland in which game proliferated allowed hunting to be practised on a large scale. Game meat was then almost the only source of animal protein for the Yamba. Domestic livestock (goats, fowls, and some sheep) was kept but used almost exclusively for marriage transactions, death celebrations, rituals and fines and thus was controlled by lineage heads. The arrival of Fulani cattle in the Yamba area was a gradual process starting in German colonial times. The Germans were trying to secure a tsetse-fly free route for cattle from Banyo to Bamenda through southern Yamba. But the Yamba objected both to admitting their former raiders, the Fulani, and opening their farms to cattle-damage. This was the reason for the military expedition against the 'Kaka', as the Yamba were formerly known, in March 1908 (Werner 1909, Hassert 1917: 3).

After the war, the French trade in cattle between Ngaoundere and Douala also passed through southern Yamba (Migeod 1925: 142). F.W. Carpenter, a British colonial officer, writes in his Intelligence Report: 'the road passes through the villages of Rom, Mbem, Nwa and Nyang (Yang) and so to Bang

on the Yola side. This route is also used by French as well as Filani (sic) for passing their cattle southwards to Nkongsamba and Port Harcourt' (1933: par. 13).

The first Fulani to settle in the Western Grassfields were Ardo Sabga and his followers who came from Banyo in 1916. From then onwards successive waves of migration, especially between 1936 and 1952, have taken place. The increase of cattle into the Western Grassfields during this period was phenomenal. By the middle of the 1960s the total number of cattle was estimated to be as high as 350.000 (Carter 1967:1). One can easily imagine that this huge influx of Fulani cattle within such a short space of time had a devastating effect on the wild fauna of the area.

In Yamba the impact was felt much later. The first Fulani settled in Upper Yamba towards the end of the 1920s. For the year 1932, E.H.S. Gorges, a British administrator, estimated the cattle-tax or jangali for the area at £10.00, which was an increase of 50% on the previous year (1932: 137). Supposing that the cattle-tax was still 1/- per head as in the 1920s it would mean that there were about 200 cattle in Yamba area in 1932. Gradually more and more Fulani arrived with their cows in Upper Yamba, but it was not until the 1960s that they ventured down the precipitous slopes and steep valleys into Lower Yamba in search of dry season pasture.

Another even more damaging, effect on the wild life of the area had been, in my opinion, the spread of efficient guns and especially the practice of night hunting with hunting lamps.

In what follows I shall first give a brief description of the main features of the communal hunt and also describe the spatial arrangements and internal organisation of Nkwi, one of the six quarters of Gom village in Lower Yamba. This is necessary because the communal hunt and the rituals connected with it are carried out at quarter level and because, for reasons mentioned below, I had chosen Nkwi as the locus of my research into the communal hunt and hunting rituals. Secondly, I shall try to bring out the social, ritual and religious dimensions of the hunt and the interconnection between success in hunting and the moral integrity of the community. It will become clear that neglect of affinal obligations and transgressions of the moral code of the community put the success of the hunt and the safety of the hunters in jeopardy. Thirdly, I shall discuss the office of the huntmasters (*ngwa nyam*) who control the communal hunt. By performing certain rituals they ensure a successful hunt and prevent supernatural sanctions from following the hunters to the hunting bush. In the fourth and main part I shall focus on the various hunting rituals

and omen-taking which precede, accompany and follow hunting activities. In connection with the butchering of the animals caught in the chase and the division of meat, which follows fixed rules, I shall also examine the obligations of the sister's/daughter's son (Z/DS, *monjɛ'*) towards his mother's father/brother (MF/B, *tɛ'tsə*).

In some respects, what follows will be a reconstruction of the situation as it existed some forty to fifty years ago, but most of the rituals and omen-taking connected with the communal hunt are still performed in Yamba today.

The Communal Hunt

The communal hunt is an annual event, which takes place at the end of the dry season/beginning of the rainy season (February to April). The different hunts are organised at quarter level but hunters from other quarters or even villages are welcome to join. In Lower Yamba there is no communal hunt in which the village as a whole takes part, unlike what happens in Mfe (Upper Yamba), for example, where all the quarters of the village join for the annual hunt of the chief who has his own hunting ground called *foin*. But this may be a recent innovation taken over from Nso' or the Wimbun chiefdoms, where the *man-jon* or *mfu'* societies organise communal hunts. In Lower Yamba the *nzɛr* society (see later) does not organise communal hunts.

Informants still tell of the good old days, when up to a hundred or more hunters joined the annual hunt. All able-bodied men, from teenage boys to old men would take part. Nowadays, most of the young boys no longer join the hunt because they are attending school, and as soon as they have completed primary school they are leaving the village either to continue their education or in search of a better life. This trend has dealt a serious blow to the success of the communal hunt since fewer hunters stand less chance of preventing animals from escaping from the hunting area.

Formerly, only spears and dogs were used in hunting, nowadays also guns. Every hunter carries between three and five spears. When the hunters have surrounded the hunting area, some experienced men begin to set fire to the grass at strategic points. As the fire blazes up the steep slopes or along the valley the majority of the hunters would wait with their dogs for animals to escape the fire. After the grass has been burnt the dogs are sent into the remaining pockets of grass to flush out the animals still hiding there. Drivers are not used in Yamba.

Communal hunting is still practised today but on a much reduced scale. Nowadays the only animals caught in the chase are mainly *nyandzəmə* (the

cane rat or cutting-grass, *Thryonomys swinderianus*), *tsə* (the red duiker, *Cephalophus* sp.), *shwi* (the grey duiker, *Cephalophus* sp.), *mbuju* (the Togo hare, *Lupus capensis zechi*), and occasionally the crested porcupine (*ηgum*, *Hysterix cristata*), the brushtailed porcupine (*Aetherurus africanus*), or the African civet cat (*cop*, *Viverra civeta*). Larger antelopes like the bushbuck (*ηgap*, *Tragelaphus* sp.) are now very rare in Yamba area. Informants told me that formerly up to five *ηgap* were sometimes killed in a communal hunt.

There are two types of communal hunt. The first one is called *tε wum* (stand on, hunt) which opens the hunting season. *Tε wum* is followed by *fua* (burn grass). *Tε wum* is different from *fua* in that the hunters go to a special hunting area which is not owned by a lineage, the grass is not burnt and the division of meat follows slightly different rules. The hunters surround the hunting area and the dogs are sent into the pockets of grass to flush out the animals hiding there.

Owned hunting areas (*fua*) are hunted, one a day, alternating between the two 'sides' of the hamlet. For example, if a *fua* belonging to a lineage of Upper Nkwi is hunted today, tomorrow one belonging to a lineage of Lower Nkwi is 'burnt'. Each lineage owns three or more hunting areas.

When a hunter hits an animal with his spear inflicting the first wound (this is called the 'first spear') he shouts, '*Təm mɛ, təm mɛ, təm mɛ!*' (I have hit it!) or simply, '*Mɛ-mɛ-mɛ-mɛ-mɛ!*' (It's me!). This is called *cim nzur*. I was told that the hunter does this for two reasons. First, he wants to make clear to everybody that it was he who inflicted the first wound (his companions would recognise his voice). This has bearing on the division of meat. Secondly, hunters are alerted that an animal has been hit and may be running away with a spear stuck in its body. *Cim nzur* rallies the nearby hunters to come to his aid.

Animals are divided into those 'with skin', that is, those which are skinned, and those whose hair is singed, before butchering. Animals 'with skin' are the bushbuck (*ηgap*), the red duiker (*tsə*) and the grey duiker (*shwi*). When the hunters succeed in killing an animal 'with skin' they at once begin to sound the *so*' cry (*so*' is a juju masquerade). The saying goes, '*O təm ηgap (tsə), so' fisə*' (they shoot bushbuck [red duiker], *so*' 'comes out'). The *so*' cry is taken up by all the hunters so that the whole hunting area reverberates with this high, shrill cry. It was explained to me that '*so*' comes out' because a 'manly' animal, an animal with a name or prestige animal has been killed. Their skins are used to cover the drums, especially the drums played at death celebrations (*ncum kpɛ*) to announce the death of a person. The sounding of the *so*' cry is

also a means of announcing to other quarters or villages that a *ŋgap* or *tsə* has been killed (making them jealous?).

Private hunting with guns, trapping and laying of snares takes place throughout the year but is of minor importance. Only a few hunters pursue such activities. At the beginning of the rainy season (end of March, beginning of April) women and men engage in community fishing, each group fishing separately. Men use nets while women use flat, baglike traps made of raffia cane.

3. The Field-Setting

As mentioned already, I restrict myself to the practices of Nkwi quarter of Gom. I have chosen Nkwi for several reasons. Due to its remoteness and isolation, Nkwi is in many ways still a ‘traditionalist’ community. It lies about 3 km north of Gom village centre where the market and primary schools (Government and Baptist) are situated. No motorable road connects Gom with Nkwi. The performance of life-cycle and other rituals and seasonal dances is still very much in evidence. Another reason for making Nkwi my choice for research into hunting rituals was the fact that I know Nkwi reasonably well and also because my principal informant, Pa Sam Kobuin, is a native of Nkwi. Since his late ‘father’ (lineage head), Jatong, was a huntmaster (*ŋgwa nyam*) he had observed, and participated in all the rituals connected with the communal hunt. My other main informant, Pa Monday Kongnjo, although a native of Sang quarter of Gom, lived for several years in Nkwi. He is a *ŋgwa nyam* and renowned as a diviner. As to my personal experience in communal hunts I should also mention that in the 1970s I had the opportunity to participate in several such hunts in Binju/Nkambe (Wimbum). The Wimbum are western neighbours of the Yamba.

Gom is the largest village in Lower Yamba. According to the census of 1976 it had a population of 2.767. As in most Yamba villages there is no true village, but a series of ‘quarters’ or hamlets. Gom has six quarters, viz. Mulip, Sang, Go, Kulip, Nchak and Nkwi (see Map 2). These quarters, each of which has its own ‘chief’, are spread out over a large basin formed by the confluence of three rivers, the Massim, the Marom, and the Marube, and surrounded by high hills. The Gom basin is covered with forest and large numbers of palm trees grow there. From Nchak which lies on the left bank of the Massim river a footpath leads north to Nkwi and from there to Koffa in the Mfumte area.

Nkwi, with a population of about 200, is situated on a spur extending from the hill overlooking the Gom basin to the north (Map 3). The hamlet is

divided into two ‘sides’ (*nfu*), Bu-Fəm being the upper side and Ma-Kwak the lower side. Each of the two sides has three ‘kitchens’, i.e. lineages (*boate* or *bu’lak*) which are exogamous units. The chief (*ɲkum*), Foa-Makong (also referred to as Foa-Bubuin), resides in Bu-Fəm. Ma-Kwak is headed by a *ɲji*, Wufa’ who is second to the chief. Foa-Nyongu is in charge of the *nda rum*. At the time of my research Foa-Nyongu held both positions, those of Wufa’ and Foa-Nyongu. After his death in 1998 the two positions were separated again, Benjamin Lakah being installed as Wufa’ and Adamu as Foa-Nyongu. Near the chief’s ‘palace’, which is in no way different from other compounds, is the *mambiɲ* (*mbiɲ* means open place, yard), where formerly the chief, the lineage heads and other senior men of the quarter joined for rituals, discussions of community affairs and the settling of cases. The *mambiɲ* is out of bounds to women and those not initiated into the main Yamba cults. Next to the *mambiɲ* stands the *cak tu*, the skull shrine where skulls of ‘law animals’¹⁶ such as the leopard (*mbe*), the bushcow (*nye*), the chimpanzee (*buk*), and human skulls of enemies killed in war are kept. The *cak tu* is the shrine of the *nɛɛr* (‘red feather’) society. The *nɛɛr* society has two sections, to wit *nɛɛr cocoɲ* (wet or fresh *nɛɛr*) whose members are exclusively hunters who have killed ‘law animals’ or warriors who have killed enemies in war, and *nɛɛr yuyum* (dry *nɛɛr*), the male members of the two descent groups of Nkwi who are the custodians of the *nɛɛr* cult. The leader of the *nɛɛr* society and man in charge of the *cak tu* is called Bumtu (*bum* means tradition, *tu* head). Ma-Kwak too has a *mambiɲ*, but no *cak tu*.

Both Upper and Lower Nkwi have a *dzok nyam*, the hunting shrine of the huntmasters (*ɲgwa nyam*) consisting of an upright stone surrounded by a stone circle. There are three *ɲgwa nyam* in Nkwi. The two senior ones are the chief, Foa-Makong of Bu-Fəm, and Pa Tobuin of Ma-Kwak. Pa Jatong of Bu-Fəm, the junior *ɲgwa nyam*, died in 1994. He has been succeeded by one of his sons.

Each lineage or ‘kitchen’ has its own hunting shrine called *dzok swi* (place of pepper) which consists of three upright stones. In addition they each have a *dzok taam*, the shrine where traps, and nowadays also guns are ‘fixed’.

16. It is interesting that among the Yamba the python is not considered a ‘law animal’. It is ‘just a snake’, I was told.

The Social, Ritual and Religious Dimension of the Communal Hunt

The communal hunt is closely interconnected with the social life of the community. Neglect of affinal obligations, the blood of birth and breaches of the moral code of the community all threaten the success of the hunt or may be the cause of hunting accidents. Strife and enmity within the family or within the community are detrimental to the hunt.

4.1. The Ambivalent Role of the *nje'gu*

In the foregoing chapter, I have shown that among the Yamba the female dependents (*nje'gu*) of a lineage are believed to be invested with beneficial powers to enhance fertility and the success of the lineage in its various economic activities including hunting. When a *nje'gu* gets married this beneficial role is reversed and she may become a threat to the fecundity of the palm bush (*kop*), farm crops and hunting if the husband fails in his affinal obligations. As soon as a *nje'gu* gets pregnant for the first time the husband has to provide four fowls: *mvəp kop* (fowl, palm bush), *mvəp mgbe'* (fowl, mortar), *mvəp taam* (fowl, trap), and *mvəp lak* (fowl, settlement). Informants state that these fowls must be given because the young *nje'gu* has been drinking palm wine freely, she could eat of the mesocarp of the palm nuts when oil was produced in the huge tree-mortars, and she would be given morsels of game meat caught in traps or snares. She could do this because she was believed to be at the source of good, of fertility and success in hunting. When she gets married she takes away, as it were, these beneficial powers and so becomes a threat. The lineage would get little oil when 'cooking' the palm nuts, palm trees would cease to leak wine, farms would produce a poor harvest, traps would stay empty and hunters would fail to attract and kill game. In order to restore this loss of fertility and success the bride-receiver has to give the four fowls. Three of the fowls, *mvəp kop*, *mvəp mgbe'* and *mvəp taam*, concern the lineage while *mvəp lak* concerns the 'side' of the quarter where the *nje'gu* comes from. When the bride-receiver gives *mvəp kop* the bride-giver takes the fowl to the palm bush and brushes it against the palm bush shrine (*mbuk kop*), thus restoring its fertility. When *mvəp mgbe'* is given, the lineage head knocks it against the large tree mortar, plucks some feathers and sticks them in the ground next to it. This is believed to ensure plenty of oil. The *mvəp taam* is brushed against the three stones of the *dzok taam*, thus re-opening the way to successful hunting.

The fourth fowl, *mvəp lak*, calls for the participation of the huntmaster (*ngwa nyam*). When the bride-receiver brings the fowl, the lineage head calls the *ngwa nyam* of his 'side'. The huntmaster then brushes (*bap mvəp*) the cen-

tre of the yard of the three compounds belonging to the ‘side’ with the fowl. This symbolic action restores the fertility and the success of hunting of the ‘side’. Before giving it back to the lineage head he plucks some feathers which he then burns at the *dzok nyam* thus ensuring a successful hunting season.

4.2. The Blood of Birth

The blood of birth (*tsə moa*) is also believed to affect hunting in an adverse way.¹⁷ Informants told me that dogs would refuse to hunt and hunters would not kill animals because the blood of birth ‘covers’ them, i.e. locks their eyes. It is also said to neutralise the effect of a ritual called *zə koŋ* (see later) in which the spears of hunters are strengthened. The spears lose their efficacy.

As to the blood of birth a distinction is made between the blood of birth of a *nje’gu* and that of a woman married into the lineage. A *nje’gu* will deliver her first child in her mother’s house. The husband must give a fowl called *mvəp tsə* (fowl, blood of birth) and a calabash of wine (*ruk tsə*). When he brings the fowl the bride-giver calls the huntmaster (*ŋgwa nyam*) of his ‘side’ who takes it to the three compounds and brushes the centre of each yard with the fowl. He returns the fowl to the bride-giver who then kills it. The blood of the fowl is believed to wash away the blood of birth and restore hunting prowess and the efficacy of the spears. Brushing the centre of the yards with the fowl also serves as notification to all that *mvəp tsə* has been given.

When a woman married into the lineage delivers a child, her blood of birth affects the community in the same way as that of a *nje’gu* but the procedure to ‘fix’ it is quite different. The ritual sequence to counteract the disordering and destructive effects of the blood of birth in this case consists of two stages, an omen-taking ritual called *twin yo moa* (cut elephant grass child) followed a week later by *go’ swi moa* (grind malagueta pepper child). Towards the end of the rainy season (end of October, beginning of November) when there is plenty of palm wine around, the husband whose wife has delivered a child during the past year provides a large pot of wine (*ruk yo moa*) for the people of his side. On the day of the Yamba week called *ntezuru* men and women of the side gather at the chief’s place (in the case of Upper Nkwi). The father of the new child goes with a ritual specialist to the nearest place where a clump

17. Menstrual blood does not pose a threat to the communal hunt, but to the raffia bush. Should a woman during her monthly period enter a raffia bush it would dry up and produce no more wine. This belief I also found among the Wimbun.

of elephant grass grows. The specialist pulls out the top section of three stems and peels them so that only the soft inner parts (*yo*) are left.

Taking the first piece he says, ‘This *susun* (elephant grass) stands for the child. As we drink this palm wine, it may be that we are going to lose the child. Is there something wrong with the child?’ Saying this he whittles off part of the stem with a sharp knife. If the resulting cut is without a fringe, all is well. If not, the father will have to find out (through divination) where the mistake lies. The second and third piece, representing the family and in-laws respectively, is cut in the same way. Here the relationship within the family, especially between the parents of the child, and between kin and affines is examined. Such relationships have to be in good order for safe and successful hunting. The result of the omen-taking is then reported to the people who have gathered by showing them the three cuts. Should there be some ‘mistake’ the father is advised to settle the palaver. Then the wine drinking starts. *Twin yo moa* has to be made for any child born into the lineage during the past year.

This omen-taking ritual is followed a week later by a ritual called *go’ swi moa*. It takes place at the chief’s compound and everybody, men and women of the quarter, may attend. The father of the new child again provides palm wine in a large pot holding forty to fifty litres, and two calabashes of ten litres each called *ruk ngam* and *ruk fian* respectively (*ngam* means divination and *fian* refers to the skill of the diviners to ‘see’ and interpret hidden things). In addition he has to give salt measured in a drinking gourd. A grinding stone is placed in the centre of the yard. One man acts as officiant. He has no special name. He places some seeds of malagueta pepper (*swi co’*) on the stone and grinds them with a small grinding stone. He adds a pinch of salt and mixes everything well. The rest of the salt he ties in a leaf and puts in his bag. This is his pay. He then takes a special leaf and forms it into a funnel fastening it with a splinter of bamboo. Next he looks for a young man whose wife has failed to conceive although they have been living together for some time, or, failing that, for a man whose wife has just weaned her child. The officiant puts some of the ground pepper in the funnel. Locking the bottom of the cone by pressing it together with his fingers he adds palm wine. He then lets the content run into the open mouth of the young man chosen for his supposed generative weakness who swallows it. Next the officiant opens the funnel, puts the rest of the ground pepper on the open leaf and sprays a mouthful of wine on it. The young man lifts up the grinding stone and holds it against his groin. At this the officiant takes the leaf with the moistened pepper and slaps it on the small of the young man’s back. The youth goes off with the stone thrusting his pelvis

forward at every step simulating the movement of sexual intercourse. Having returned the stone to the place where it had been taken from he comes back and is given the first cup of wine to drink. Then everybody starts to drink.

Although all my informants emphatically stated that *go' swi moa* was performed in order to counteract the negative effect of the blood of parturition as regards hunting there seems to be no connection, at first sight, between the ritual sequence, hunting and the blood of birth. Instead we find other themes addressed: divination and sexual weakness or impotence. I was unable to elicit any helpful comment or explanation on these episodes except that failure to make *go' swi moa* would spoil the communal hunt, but internal evidence may help us to come to some understanding.

A first clue is provided by the name of the ritual *go' swi moa*, the 'grinding of the child's pepper'. As I have mentioned earlier, the spears of the hunters are 'strengthened' through a ritual called *zə koŋ*. Some special herbs are burnt and malagueta pepper is ground into the ashes. Each spear is treated by making small incisions on the wooden shaft just below the spear into which the mixture of ground pepper and ashes is rubbed. According to Yamba belief the blood of birth has neutralised this power. The child's pepper is believed to restore it again.

Secondly, the ritual symbolism draws an obvious analogy between the male sexual organ and the hunting spear. The child's pepper is believed to be an aphrodisiac which 'makes your skin hot', as one informant put it. As the sexual power of the impotent or sexually weak man is restored by imbibing *swi moa*, so by analogy, the hunting spears receive their full strength and efficacy once more.

Thirdly, the blood of parturition not only 'locks' the eyes of hunters and hunting dogs, it also darkens the vision of the diviners. In Yamba practically all lineage heads and senior men are diviners who divine for their dependents in cases of minor misfortune and sickness. In serious cases they will call on the skill of renowned diviners for an independent view. The two calabashes of wine, *ruk ŋgam* and *ruk fiaŋ*, are meant to 'wash' the diviners' eyes so that they can continue to 'see good things'. At the same time the eyes of the hunters and their dogs are 'opened' for a successful hunt.

4.3. Adulterous Liaisons of Women

Adultery (*fua'*, *nforo*) committed by married women of the quarters poses another serious threat to hunters. Yamba believe that affliction is visited on the children or the husband. The cuckolded husband may sustain injuries or may even be killed in a hunting accident or he may fall off a palm tree when cutting palm nuts or tapping wine.

The danger becomes still more serious if adultery is committed within the exogamous group, between a man and his 'brother's' wife or a *nje'gu*. If the transgression remains secret not only the cuckold but also the adulterer is in great danger. That is the reason why several omen-taking rituals are performed before the communal hunt to find out whether adultery has been committed within the lineage or by married women of the quarter. If divination reveals that adultery has been committed, the guilty persons have to be found out. The women have to confess and name their lovers before the transgression can be ritually 'repaired'. The adulterer has to give a fowl to the leader of the *ɲwantap* society, the most powerful secret society of the Yamba, who sprinkles 'cool water' (*təm nɛəp*) on the guilty persons thus removing the supernatural sanctions threatening them. Then a ritual specialist is called in to *lam fua'* (to 'cook' the transgression of adultery - for more details see Chapter Five). If there is no time to perform these rituals before the communal hunt (because the transgression was found out only at the last minute), the adulterer (or the husband of a wife who committed adultery with a man from another quarter or village) will hand over some feathers of a fowl to the lineage head promising to 'fix' the transgression as soon as the hunt is over. Underlying these supernatural sanctions concerning *fua'* lies the fact that in the marriage system of the Yamba the wife comes under the laws of *ɲwantap* as soon as the bridewealth has been paid (*ywin ɲgwe*), in Lower Yamba, or the 'house' has been 'locked' (*mbam lak*), in Upper Yamba (see Chapter Two). One of its main laws concerns the prohibition of adultery by the wife.

The Huntmasters (*ɲgwa nyam*)

In Yamba there are no hunting lodges such as one can find in other chiefdoms of the Western Grassfields, for example in Mankon (Warnier 1975:185) where members of the society *nda ala'* had succeeded in enforcing their monopoly over the organisation of collective hunting, or in Ide (Maquelier 1978) where certain conditions have to be fulfilled before a hunter can become a member of a hunting lodge. Neither does the chief, in Lower Yamba, have the right to claim part of the game meat of a communal hunt. He has no privileges over other lineage heads. All able-bodied men of the quarter, from teenage boys to

old men, participate in the collective hunt and receive a share of the meat. The *nzur* society, the society of the ‘red feather’, is not a hunting lodge. It does not organise communal hunts nor does it have any claim to special portions of the meat.

Although the hunting areas (*fua*) are owned by the different lineages, including the chiefly lineage, the communal hunt is controlled by the huntmasters. Their office is mainly, but not exclusively, ritual. According to one of my informants the word *ngwa* comes from *gwe*, to cut. Linguists, I’m sure, will find fault with this local etymology, but it helps to indicate the main task of the huntmasters which is ‘cutting’ or butchering of the game killed in the hunt and the division of meat which follows fixed rules.

Before describing the office of the huntmasters let me first explain how a new *ngwa nyam* is installed in Nkwi. When a huntmaster dies the corpse is tied to a bamboo structure called *ntəŋ*. On the night following the death a wake (*re kpɛ* or *noŋ kpɛ*) was held. Early in the morning the hunters come with their spears and dogs to stage a mock hunt (*wum nyam*). One of the huntmasters goes to the *ntəŋ* and addresses the deceased as follows: ‘We two, we have been “fixing” the hunt. If you want to continue to give us success in hunting we shall “see your hand” now. If you are an evil man, if you want to spoil our hunt because you have left us, we shall “see your hand” now’. A thick slice of a plantain stem is cut resembling a wheel. The hunters go off towards the east, the side of the living, calling their dogs. Suddenly the man who holds the plantain ‘wheel’ hurls it ahead of him shouting, ‘*ko, ko, ko, ko!*’ as in a real hunt when a dog has flushed out an animal. At this, the hunters run after the rolling ‘wheel’ throwing their spears. When one or two spears have pierced the plantain stump the hunters return, the mock-hunt having been successful. The two huntmasters sit down and peel off the successive layers of the plantain stump, naming each part as if actually butchering an animal, and handing out the different parts to the first, second and third spear. When they have finished they collect all the pieces and place them at the foot of the *ntəŋ*.

Meanwhile the family will have chosen a brother or son of the deceased to be the new huntmaster who has to provide two fowls, one for the dead *ngwa nyam* called *mvəp fə* (*fə* means the dead, the deceased) and one for himself called *mvəp nyom* (*nyom* means sun, here ‘the living’). The two fowls are shared by the two huntmasters. On each of the first three days of the next communal hunt the new huntmaster has to provide a calabash of palm wine which he brings to the place where the animals are butchered (*gaamgə*). He will be shown how to divide the meat, what to do when it is discovered that a

pregnant animal has been killed, and any other thing a huntmaster has to know. After butchering the animals and dividing the meat they wash their hands with part of the wine, the rest they drink.

This ritual dramatisation of the hunt (*wum nyam*) at the death of a *ngwa nyam* brings out some interesting points. Because of his ritual office, the huntmaster has ensured successful hunting. At his death it is feared that he will take this success along with him into the grave. To prevent this a new huntmaster has to be installed before the deceased one is buried. Secondly, *wum nyam* is made to find out whether the huntmaster has died with a ‘good heart’ towards his people and the other two *ngwa nyam*, which will guarantee further success, or whether he died with an unresolved anger. This is what is meant by ‘seeing his hand’. An unsuccessful mock-hunt augurs an unsuccessful hunting season. The huntmasters will have to find out the reason, which may be a disagreement between themselves or an unresolved grudge of one of them against the other two.

Let us now briefly consider the office of the huntmasters, their duties and rights. As has been mentioned already, one of their main duties is to ensure and promote success in hunting. They achieve this by:

- Carrying out omen-taking rituals before the hunt to detect any transgressions of the moral code of the community, failure of affinal obligations or neglect to repair the negative effects caused by the blood of birth, which can spoil the communal hunt.
- Preventing supernatural sanctions from following the hunters to the hunting bush.
- ‘Calming’ or sedating the animals in a hunting area before the hunt.
- Disposing of the foetus of a pregnant animal killed in the hunt.

Secondly, the huntmasters have the exclusive right to butcher all the animals killed in a communal hunt and to divide the meat according to fixed rules, setting aside their own part of each animal which they share among themselves.

Thirdly, if a ‘law animal’ (e.g. a bushcow or leopard) or any other large animal such as a bushpig and nowadays even a bushbuck (*ngap*) is sighted or its fresh spoor discovered the huntmasters will proceed to ritually ‘lock’ the animal (*lokse ki nyam* — lock foot animal) within the vicinity of the settlement so that it should not escape but be cornered and killed by the hunters. They also butcher ‘law animals’ at the *cak tu* after Bumtu has skinned and removed the head of the animal. Finally, in case of a hunting accident or repeated failure by the hunters to kill animals it is the duty of the huntmasters to find out the cause, so that appropriate steps can be taken to redress the situation.

Yamba Hunting Rituals

Hunting rituals among the Yamba are of various kinds. They can be grouped together into omen-taking rituals, rituals to promote success in hunting, and rituals to prevent supernatural sanctions from following hunters to the hunting bush. In the following I shall describe the various rituals as they are performed before, during and after the hunt.

6.1. Raising of the Spear (*kokse koŋ*)

One week after the *cimbi* dance, which usually takes place towards the end of November, the members of the *nzur* society assemble at the *mambiŋ* of Upper Nkwi. When they come back from their palm bushes in the evening they do not go to their houses but spend the night at the *mambiŋ*, the reason being that they have to observe sexual continence on that night.¹⁸ They must also heat their wine before they drink it. At the first cockcrow they get up and Buntu, the head of the *nzur* society, reaches up into the loft of the *cak tu* (skull shrine) and takes down a special spear, which is kept there, and three animal skulls. He places the skulls on the ground and pokes the spear into each of them. The third skull he lifts up and keeping it poised on the iron tip he sticks the spear into the thatch of the roof. Spear and skull are left there for three days during which nobody is allowed to work in the farms. At the end of the third day skull and spear are taken down and put back on the loft. The special spear, which has a long wide blade like a lance, is said to represent all the hunting spears of the quarter. By poking it into the skulls and keeping it stuck in the thatch of the roof with the skull poised on its tip all the spears of the hunters are strengthened. Special power is believed to emanate from the skull and enter the spear and, by extension, all the spears.

6.2. Beating the Legs of Hunters with *nzur* Medicine (*lip tu nzur*)

Two days before the first communal hunt (*te wum*) all the hunters of Nkwi assemble at the *mambiŋ* of Upper Nkwi. The hunters are divided into two groups, the members of the *nzur* society (*bwin ŋga nzur*) and the rest of the hunters (*bwin ŋga wum*). Every hunter comes with a small calabash of palm wine. Each group has its own pot into which the wine is poured. Special herbs, different for the two groups, are placed in the pots and the wine is heated. Hunters may only drink hot wine. This is done so that the hunt will be

18. There is no injunction against sexual intercourse on the night before the communal hunt in Yamba, as has been reported from other communities of the Western Grass-fields (e.g. Masquelier 1978:245, Baeke 1987:223).

‘hot’. The wine of the *nzhr* society is referred to as ‘wet’ (*cocoŋ*) and the one of the ordinary hunters as ‘dry’ (*yuyum*). An ordinary hunter may not drink the wine of the *nzhr* society and vice versa. Here we are dealing again with the contrasting concepts of hot/cold and wet/dry. War and the hunt are ‘hot’, both involving the shedding of blood. The heat of the hunt is contrasted with the coolness of the hunting area which makes the animals hiding in it want to stay there. The ritual *fopke fua* (see below) is designed to ‘cool’ the hunting area. I was unable to elicit any exegesis on the significance of the contrasted pair dry/wet.

Before the wine is drunk, Bumtu cuts some special plants (*tu nzhr*). As the hunters come up to him one by one, he beats them about the legs with the plants, the person being treated jumping up and down and turning. Bumtu accompanies this action with an invocation, saying, ‘When you go hunting tomorrow may your knees not buckle. When you run may you not get tired.’ All the hunters, from the youngest to the oldest, are treated in the same way. Informants told me that *lip tu nzhr* is made to make ‘the bodies of the hunters light so that they may “fly” and not get tired’.

While the assembled hunters drink the wine the huntmasters will carry out an omen-taking ritual called *ngam wum* (divination hunt), to find out whether the coming hunting season will be successful or whether there is something that could spoil the hunt. One of the *ngwa nyam* fills a drinking gourd with wine. He takes the seed of the malagueta pepper (*swi co*) and after asking that divination will show how the hunt will be he drops one seed into the cup. This is done about three times, each time with a different seed. If the seeds stay on the surface the answer is positive and nothing is done. If the seeds sink to the bottom it is a bad omen. In this case the huntmasters will try to locate the ‘mistake’, first by asking which of the two ‘sides’ is responsible for the threatening misfortune, then by examining each lineage of the ‘guilty’ side. Thus, by way of elimination, they are able to pinpoint the ‘mistake’. Possible causes may be the failure of the husband of a *nje’gu* to give one (or all) of the fowls required when she gets pregnant for the first time, the failure to ‘fix’ the blood of birth, or the transgression of adultery by the women of the quarter: *ngam wum* exposes these ‘mistakes’ and those concerned are under great social pressure to rectify the situation.

6.3. Striking Spears and Dogs with *kak* (*lip kak*)

On the morning of the first communal hunt (*te wum*), when the sun is well up, the huntmasters go ahead and wait at a place which the hunters will pass on their way to the hunting area. They cut some dry stalks of a special grass

called *kak* (which is also used by women as a kind of torch or taper when cooking food at night). Two long pieces of *kak* are placed across the path. As the hunters file past one by one, stepping over the *kak*, two of the huntmasters each holding two *kak* and standing on either side of the path, strike the spears and the dogs of the hunters. When all have passed, the *ngwa nyam* place their *kak* with the ones lying on the ground.

This is followed by another omen-taking ritual called *fye' wum* (to look into, inquire into the hunt). The fruit of a wild garden egg (*Solanum sp.*) called *ma-ja'tə* is cut lengthwise. The two halves are joined and, after asking how the hunt will be, thrown on the ground. If the two halves fall face down or face up this is called *coŋ* (peace).¹⁹ It is a good omen. The throw may be repeated several times. If one half falls face up and the other face down it augurs evil. In this case the huntmasters will find out by way of elimination, which of the lineages is at fault. I have been told that *fye' wum* is done especially in connection with the sexual transgression of *fua'* (adultery). A still secret and unknown case of adultery may threaten the success of the hunt. To prevent this happening the huntmasters now proceed to 'lock' the supernatural sanctions preventing them from following the hunters to the bush. One of the *ngwa nyam* takes a scraping stick (*ŋkey*) from his bag and while scraping it with a knife makes a ritual statement saying that any yet undiscovered transgressions the hunters may have committed should not follow them to the hunting bush but remain in town where they are going to 'fix' them after the hunt. After this the *ngwa nyam* knocks the wood powder off the scraping stick onto the *kak* lying on the ground and sprays palm wine over it three times. Next he takes a piece of termite hill (*kwiŋkwiŋ*) and places it on top of the *kak* and the wood powder.

Let us examine the significance of this ritual episode in more detail. Hunting is a dangerous activity. Several informants likened it to war. Dangers threaten the hunters and their dogs from all sides. There is the precipitous terrain. One wrong step can send a man tumbling down a cliff. Flying spears, spears bouncing off the ground or being deflected off a stone may hit somebody accidentally. A dog shooting out of a thicket may be mistaken for an animal and speared. Hunters and dogs may be bitten by snakes. Formerly there

19. There are local variations as to which position is held to be a good omen and which a bad one, even among the quarters of Gom. In Nkwi, if the two halves fall face up or face down it is interpreted as *coŋ* (peace), a good omen. In the Sang quarter of Gom, on the other hand, this same position is held to be a bad omen. If one half falls face up and the other face down it augurs well.

was also the hazard that a dangerous animal might be hiding in the grass and attack hunters and dogs. The possibility of hunting accidents is great and all such accidents are believed to be caused by sexual transgression, especially *fua*'.

From the above description of the *lip kak* ritual sequence it will become clear that its main aim is to avert supernatural sanctions believed to threaten the hunters on account of sexual transgression. The dry straws (*kak*) may be likened to a lightning conductor attracting and safely diffusing the threat looming over the hunters. By striking the spears and dogs of the hunters with the *kak*²⁰ the transgressions are symbolically drawn out or 'sucked away' and they enter the *kak*. Through the omen-taking *fye' wum* the huntmasters have isolated the lineages in which sexual transgressions have occurred. By scraping the *ηkey* stick, which can best be glossed as a 'confession stick', the as yet unknown transgressions are made 'public'. Having brought them out into the open they are at once 'locked' by covering them with the termite hill pending ritual resolution after the hunt. The termite hill, I was told, 'locks' everything. These small termitaries or termites' nests called *kwiηkwiη* are shaped like little round huts and are a familiar sight all over the Yamba area. Like huge mushrooms they withstand tropical rains; they are as strong as stone and impermeable. Nothing inside them can escape.

6.4. Treatment of the Spears (*zə koη*)

In Nkwi this ritual takes place on the morning after the first communal hunt (*te wum*) which is the day of the first 'burning of the grass' (*to fua*). It is peculiar to Nkwi and I could not get an explanation as to why this is so. In other quarters of Gom *zə koη* (*zə* means 'to hold into smoke', *koη* spear) is performed several days before the communal hunt. *Zə koη* takes place at lineage level and does not involve the huntmasters (unless they are also lineage heads). All the hunters gather at their respective *dzok swi* ('place of pepper'), the hunting shrine of the lineage, each bringing along two spears. After making a ritual statement which is to state the reason of the gathering, namely the 'sharpening of the spears'²¹, the lineage head burns some special herbs at the *dzok swi*. Taking up the bundle of spears he holds the spearheads into the

20. During the hunting season women must not beat a dog with *kak* or with their cooking sticks.

21. For an example of the ritual statement accompanying *kwi koη*, as *zə koη* is called in Mbem, see Jikong 1979: 52-3 — an almost identical ritual is reported from some clans in Nso' where it is called *ntangri kong* (E.M. Chilver, p.c.).

smoke rising from the burning medicine. Then he grinds some seeds of malagueta pepper into the ashes of the burnt herbs. Taking each spear in turn, he cuts some grooves into the spear shaft with a knife just below the iron tip and rubs the mixture into the incisions. This done he sprays palm wine on the bundle of spears three times. He lifts up the whole bundle and throws it on the ground towards the east, for an omen. The spears which fall with the edge of the blade up are taken by their owners. These are the spears, which will kill animals. The lineage head takes up the rest of the spears for a second throw. Again the spears with the edge of the blade up are taken. Those, which still do not fall the correct way after the third throw, are taken anyway. When asked about the meaning of this ritual informants say that it is done to ‘sharpen’ the spears. The smoke rising from the burning medicine enters the spearheads imparting a deadly power to them. An animal wounded by such a spear, even if only slightly, would not be able to run far but would soon weaken and the hunters would easily kill it. The ground pepper and ashes, which are rubbed into the incision on the spear shafts, are believed to strengthen the spears and make them ‘hot’.

The treatment of the hunting dogs now follows. Any hunter who owns a dog brings it to the lineage head who takes a pinch of the mixture of ground pepper and ashes and blows it into the nostrils of the dog (which makes the dogs sneeze violently). Through this treatment the olfactory sense of the dogs is sharpened so that they are able to pick up even the slightest scent of an animal.

Finally, an omen-taking ritual takes place called *to a li koŋ* (burn at stone spear). The lineage head places a small lump of resin (*liŋ*) on top of each of the three upright stones of the *dzok swi*. Each lump stands for a different group of people – the women of the lineage, the women of Nkwi quarter, and the men of Nkwi quarter. The lumps of resin are lit. As the resin melts it runs down along the surface of the stones. If it runs down in a single line it is a good omen. If it divides into two or more lines it augurs evil. When this happens, it is said to speak with ‘two mouths’; it means that there is something amiss. A discussion follows during which the senior members of the lineage will try to locate the problem (again the problem under investigation is undiscovered sexual transgressions). Promises to ‘fix’ the transgression after the hunting season is over are made.

6.5. Covering the Grass (*fopkə fua*)

The ritual *fopkə fua*, which is intended to ‘calm’ or sedate the animals hiding in the hunting area, is performed by the huntmasters each morning when a hunting bush (*fua*) belonging to a lineage is ‘burnt’ (*to fua*). The three *ngwa nyam* meet at the *dzok nyam* (their hunting shrine). They are given a small calabash of palm wine by the owner of the *fua*. One of the senior *ngwa nyam* takes out the horn of a red duiker (*ndo tsə*) from his bag and fills it with wine. After pouring the wine on the ground he blows the horn softly three times, before uttering the following incantation:

Si nyam doro, doro, doro. May the vision [lit. face] of animals be dull [or stupid].

Si bwin kaŋ, kaŋ, kaŋ. May the vision of men be very sharp.

Si ngbɛ, kaŋ, kaŋ, kaŋ. May the vision of dogs be very sharp.

Si koŋ kaŋ, kaŋ, kaŋ. May the ‘vision’ of spears be very sharp.

Blowing the duiker horn sharply three times the huntmaster continues:

ŋga nya nə bɛp, e ca beŋgə-beŋgə. May the ‘vision’ of spears be very sharp.

ŋga nya nə boŋ, e to mu bo bwin. If it is a good animal, may it enter into the hands of people.

koŋ ko ye mu ba lis ba tyəm. May spears pierce [lit. catch] its eyes and heart.

ka nyom boa’, mə lo ba nzɛr, e lo ba kpɛ. When the sun goes down, let me go with *nzɛr* (i.e. my ‘decoration’ for having killed an animal, let it go with its death).

Again the *ngwa nyam* blows the horn softly and goes on: ‘May dogs catch animals, may hunters catch them with their hands, may they mash them under their feet. When they throw their spears may they not miss. Should an animal escape (the chain of hunters surrounding the hunting area) may the trees, stones and termite hills turn into people before its eyes so that it gets frightened and comes back where the hunters will easily kill it.’ The *tsə* horn is blown for the last time.

Then the huntmasters take a large, heartshaped leaf called *mbəmbuəm*. Each sprays palm wine over it three times, after which it is placed face down on the ground at the foot of the single upright stone of the *dzok nyam*. Having drunk the wine the huntmasters proceed to the hunting area, the two senior ones blowing their *ŋkup*, a small wooden flute. One flute produces a high

tone, the other a low tone. Hearing the *ŋkup* the hunters know it is time to go and the sound indicates to them the direction they have to follow.

Let us start the exegesis of this ritual with the *tsə* horn. Yamba belief accords strong mystical powers to the *ndo tsə*. It is used in many of their rituals. In the above ritual it not only gives efficacy to the incantation but also ‘carries’ it to the hunting area where it is believed to take effect unfailingly. In this context one is reminded of the ritual ‘execution’ (*gwe so*) of cannibal witches guilty of having eaten a child who are summoned by the ritual specialist, by blowing the *tsə* horn, to meet his waiting knife (see also Bæke 1984:176).

The *mbəmbuəm* leaf is another symbol widely used in Yamba rituals. In the ritual *fopkə fua* it is meant to ‘cover’ the animals hiding in the hunting area, to make them dull, stupid and blind. One of my informants put it another way. He told me that the *mbəmbuəm* leaf and the ‘cool’ wine (poured on the ground and on the leaf) makes the hunting area ‘cool’ so that animals hiding in it like to stay there with no intention of leaving the place. When the hunters surround the bush they will meet them and easily kill them. Here again we have the concept of ‘coolness’ in the hot/cold thermal contrast mentioned above.

7. Division of Meat (*sa’sə nyam*)

By mid-afternoon the hunting area has been thoroughly hunted over and the hunters leave for the place where the animals are butchered and the meat divided. This place is different for each hunting area. In Nkwi it is called *gaamgə*. Fires are lit and those animals which are not animals ‘with skin’ are singed. The *ŋgwa nyam* put fresh leaves or palm fronds on the ground to prevent the meat getting soiled when it is cut up. No special butchering knife or board is used.

If an animal ‘with skin’ (a *ŋgap* or *tsə*) has been killed, the first such animal receives a special treatment. The huntmasters perform a small ritual called *kopte swi nyam* (exchange pepper animal). Two of the huntmasters sit down facing each other and the carcass of the *ŋgap* or *tsə* is placed between them. One of the huntmasters takes three seeds of malagueta pepper from his bag and hands them one by one across the carcass to the other huntmaster sitting opposite him, who returns them in the same way. This is done three times. Next a deep incision is made between the nostrils of the animal. Each *ŋgwa nyam* crushes a seed of *swi co* in his mouth and spits three times into the cut. This is followed by the same ritual incantation as they have made when ‘locking the grass’ (*fopkə fua*). After this the animal is skinned.

As to the meaning of *kopte swi nyam*, one informant said that it was done to make the hunt ‘hot’ which is accounted for by the usage of pepper. Another informant offered that by exchanging the seeds of malagueta pepper three times across the carcass the *ngwa nyam* ‘tie a rope’. The implication is this: the hunt has been successful. An animal ‘with a skin’ has been killed. The *ngwa nyam* want to make sure that this luck stays with them till the end of the hunting season. The movement of their hands to and fro across the slain animal suggests the tying of a rope or the weaving of a net. The good luck must be ‘tied down’ so that it cannot escape.

As has been mentioned already, the division of meat (*sa’sse nyam*) follows fixed rules. These rules differ according to the type of animals killed and whether the communal hunt is *te wum* or *to fua*. When the hunting area of a lineage is hunted over the owner receives the hindquarters (*bi fua*) of an animal killed, except for the bushbuck (*ngap*). The custom in Nkwi is somewhat peculiar in that the three lineages of a ‘side’ share the *bi fua* when a hunting bush of their ‘side’ is hunted. *Bi fua* is not given for the first communal hunt (*te wum*) for the simple reason that nobody owns that particular hunting area. Whenever a bushbuck (*ngap*) is killed the hindquarters (the most fleshy parts) are cut up into small pieces and shared out among the hunters who did not kill an animal. Thus every hunter who participates in the hunt receives something.

Table 1 gives a schematic view of the claims to portions of the meat. Three animals, the bushbuck (*ngap*), the red duiker (*tsə*), and the cutting-grass (*nyandzəmə*, in Upper Yamba *ndzərə*), are given by way of example.

Table 1 Table showing division of meat (*sa’sse nyam*)

Receiver	bushbuck (<i>ngap</i>)	red duiker (<i>tsə</i>)	cutting-grass (<i>nyandzəmə</i>)
‘first spear’	chest with foreleg attached (<i>ngun nyam</i>), head (<i>tu</i>), heart (<i>tyəm</i>), lungs (<i>fwes</i>), skin (<i>ngop</i>)	chest with foreleg attached (<i>ngun nyam</i>), head (<i>tu</i>), heart (<i>tyəm</i>), lungs (<i>fwes</i>), skin (<i>ngop</i>)	chest with foreleg attached (<i>ngun nyam</i>), head (<i>tu</i>), heart (<i>tyəm</i>), lungs (<i>fwes</i>)
‘second spear’	neck (<i>mi</i>)	part of hind leg (<i>massa gbo</i>)	part of hind leg (<i>massa gbo</i>)
‘third spear’	tail part (<i>ηkwen</i>)	intestines (<i>nto</i>)	intestines (<i>nto</i>)
‘fourth spear’	intestines (<i>nto</i>)	-	-
dog (its owner)	one foreleg (<i>kwak se ηgbt</i>)	one foreleg (<i>kwak se ηgbt</i>)	one foreleg (<i>kwak se ηgbt</i>)

carriers	small part of lower back (<i>nzɛt</i>)	small part of lower back (<i>nzɛt</i>)	-
huntmasters	lower back plus loins (<i>nzɛt</i>), peritonium (<i>ŋgop mvəm</i>), liver (<i>mbie</i>), kidneys (<i>mvəm nyam</i>)	lower back plus loins (<i>nzɛt</i>), peritonium (<i>ŋgop mvəm</i>), liver (<i>mbie</i>), kidneys (<i>mvəm nyam</i>), neck (<i>mi</i>)	lower back plus loins (<i>nzɛt</i>), peritonium (<i>ŋgop mvəm</i>), liver (<i>mbie</i>), kidneys (<i>mvəm nyam</i>)
owner of hunting area		hindquarters (<i>bi fua</i>)	hindquarters (<i>bi fua</i>)
general	hindquarters (<i>bi</i>)	-	-

Special laws govern the consumption of animal heads. Although the ‘first spear’ receives the head of an animal he killed as part of his own share he is usually not the one to eat it. The head of a cutting-grass and other small animals he gives to his wife or mother who cooks and eats it with her children. The head of a *ŋgap* or *tsə* is taken to the lineage head who cooks it at the *dzok swi* and eats it with other male members of the lineage including the hunter. But a hunter who has never killed a bushbuck or red duiker before may not join. When he kills his first *ŋgap* or *tsə* he brings the head to the lineage head who cooks it with some special herbs. When the food is ready he gives the hunter a small piece presenting it to him on the tip of a knife. The hunter tastes it and spits it out, first to his left, then to his right, and finally in front of him, before he joins the meal. Failure to give the heads of animals to the women or to the lineage head brings bad luck to the hunter. It will ‘spoil his hand’.

The first head of a male duiker and the first two heads of female duikers are given to the junior and senior huntmasters respectively. I was told that the junior huntmaster receives the head of the first male *tsə* killed ‘for his work’. Let me explain.

During the first half of January, on the day when the women dance *matitik* on *ntezuru* of the Yamba week the ‘alarm cry’ (*faŋ ŋgu se*, give alarm cry; see Chapter Seven) is sounded from the *mambiq*. Towards the evening the junior huntmaster goes alone to a place which marks the boundary between village/farm and bush. Three upright stones in the form of a hunting shrine mark the place. The huntmaster puts a small lump of resin (*liŋ*) on top of each of the three stones and burns them for a first omen (*to a li koŋ*). After the omen-taking he sets fire to the grass just behind the stones. Formerly this marked the beginning of the general burning of the bush. Before that day nobody was allowed to set fire to the bush.²² When the man who is to raise the alarm sees

the fire he goes to the *mambiŋ* and shouts on top of his voice: ‘*Yiyaŋ lose bie-o!*’ (Let all sickness go away!). Each time the alarm cry is raised, any person within hearing distance takes it up and repeats it but at a higher pitch.

Here I should add an interesting aside. The man who shouts from the *mambiŋ* carries with him a bamboo flute called *nduə*. The flute is about three feet long with a mouth hole at one end and three finger holes at the other end, both ends being closed: it is played sideways. From this day on any man, young or old, begins to play his flute. They play at home or when going to the farm or palm bush. Informants say that the playing of the flute is intended to invite or rather to entice ‘fine things to come to the village’. The flute playing comes to an abrupt end on the day of the first communal hunt (*tɛ wum*). The saying goes, ‘*O tɛ wum, nduə mi*’. There seems to be no other connection with hunting.

Although the three huntmasters are given the first male and the first female heads of the duiker they may not eat them. If they did the hunt would spoil. They dry the heads and either sell them or give them as present to a friend. But buyer or friend must not be people of Gom. I could not get any explanation on these injunctions other than that the hunt would spoil.

Should the huntmasters, when opening a carcass, discover that the animal was pregnant, they would stop and tell all hunters to avert their eyes. Then they would remove the foetus and put it in their bag. No hunter must see the foetus being removed. If they did it would ‘spoil their hand’, in other words affect their hunting skill. The huntmasters take the foetus to their shrine (*dzok nyam*) where they cook and consume it the next day, with special herbs. If the pregnant animal is a *ŋgap* or *tsə*, the following day is declared a rest day. No hunting takes place. I was told that this was done out of respect for the dead ‘child’. But another consideration could also be put forward: things must be allowed to come to term (E.M. Chilver, p.c.)

It can happen that two hunters have a claim over the same animal, each of them pretending that he inflicted the first wound. In this case, if there are no witnesses to support either claim and the problem cannot be resolved, one of the contestants will finally cut the argument short. He will take *kak* (dry stalks) and striking the carcass he says, ‘If it is you who have shot the animal, take it. When we go hunting tomorrow we will see the truth. If it is I who shot it first I will kill animals tomorrow but you won’t.’ Should his opponent fail to

22. Nowadays the bush is fired by the Fulani cattle herders about two or three weeks after the last rain has fallen with the result that the grass never burns well.

shoot an animal the next day it is a sign that he had lied. He has to pay his rival for the meat.

8. Part of the Meat Given to Mother's Father/Brother (*tɛ̀'ʈsə*)

The obligation of a *monje'* (sister's/daughter's son) to give the first animal he kills to his mother's father/brother (*tɛ̀'ʈsə*), as one can find stated in the few references to it in the literature of the Western Grassfields, is rather more complicated. Among the Yamba there are regional variations to the rule as to who receives the first animal a youth kills. In Nkot and in Sang quarter of Gom, for example, the first animal killed by a young boy is given to his own father. This is called *nyam toŋ*, the animal of the navel. On the other hand, this practice is not known in Nkwi where the first animal is given to the *tɛ̀'ʈsə*.

Secondly, only animals killed in a communal hunt are liable to be given to one's *tɛ̀'ʈsə*. The hunter will try to conceal animals killed in a private hunt or caught in traps or snares. But a 'bad' *tɛ̀'ʈsə*, should he get to know of it, may get angry and his anger will affect the hunting skill of his *monje'*.

Thirdly, it is not the whole animal that is given. Only the part called *ŋguŋ nyam* (the chest with one foreleg attached) which is the share allotted to the 'first spear' goes to the mother's father. The parts received by the second or third spear do not fall under this obligation. Furthermore, in Nkwi, only animals 'with skin' (*ŋgap* or *ʈsə*) are given. But this seems to be different in other Yamba villages.

After a communal hunt, the hunter who received *ŋguŋ nyam* as his share for having inflicted the first wound takes it to his *tɛ̀'ʈsə*. When he arrives at the compound he calls a *nje'gu* (a female dependent of the lineage) and gives her the bag with the meat. The *nje'gu* will investigate the bag and then announce the good news to the lineage head who calls all the men of the compound to come and join him at the *dzok swi*. He takes a spear and tells his *monje'* to stand at a distance. He holds the spear in a vertical position with the spear-head pointing to the ground and throws it towards his *monje'* who catches it. He may not just hand it to him by placing it in his hand but must throw it. This spear is his reward and it is believed to be endowed with great potency. It will kill many animals.

Before the wine drinking starts the *tɛ̀'ʈsə* sprays wine three times on the open hands of his *monje'* who closes his hands each time as if to grab the wine. The third time he wipes his hands along his arms, flexing them. What we see here is the beneficial role a mother's father/brother plays in the life of his *monje'*. The spraying of wine on his *monje'*'s hands is a sign of blessing

so that he should have more success in his hunting endeavours. The *monje*' tries to 'grab' as much of this blessing as he can.

When a *monje*' has given game meat to his *tɛ'tsə* about five or six times, he will be rewarded by his mother's kin. At a family meeting the *tɛ'tsə* will ask any male member of the lineage to contribute something so that they can reward their *monje*' (*o su monje' nguŋ nyam*). On an arranged day the *monje*' is invited. He comes with some members of his lineage bringing along some calabashes of palm wine. The *monje*' is given a goat or some money for his efforts and loyalty. Formerly he would have received a number of marriage shovels (so). A *monje*' who never gave *nguŋ nyam* to his *tɛ'tsə* may not accept any game meat from his own sister's/daughter's son or sons under pain of supernatural sanctions. If his *monje*' brings *nguŋ nyam* to him he has to pass it on to his *tɛ'tsə*. This is the only reason I was given why a *monje*' gives meat to his *tɛ'tsə*, but one suspects that there is more to it than that.

9. Other Hunting Rituals

There are some other hunting rituals performed in Nkwi and other Yamba villages which are not directly connected with the communal hunt:

a) Cleansing the Hunter from bad luck (*yi' lim*)

When a hunter persistently has bad luck, losing his power and skill to attract and kill game, he will ask a young girl of his lineage (*nje'gu*) to 'clean him from bad luck' (*yi' lim*). He brings a small amount of 'country salt' (*ci lak*, salt produced from plant ashes) and a dry elephant stalk which he slices in two. He puts the salt on the open left hand of the *nje'gu*. Then he makes a 'confession', recounting the mistakes he has made which have caused him bad luck. Such mistakes may be that he did not bring the heads of animals he killed to the lineage head or failed to give *nguŋ nyam* to his *tɛ'tsə*. The girl then takes the sliced elephant stalks, dips them in the salt and scrapes the outstretched tongue of the hunter three times. Each time he spits. Then the *nje'gu* places the sliced stalks on his head. Jerking his head forwards, the hunter causes the stalks to fall on the ground. If they both fall face up or face down (denoting *coŋ*, peace) the bad luck has left him. If one falls face up and the other face down it means that he has not confessed all his mistakes which have caused his bad luck.

b) Anti-snake-bite Medicine (*ncəp nyo*)

Although not a ritual, the preparation and use of anti-snake-bite medicine is very important as regards hunting. Snakes are a serious hazard for hunters and dogs and they must be protected against snakebites. Once a year the lineage head prepares medicine against snakebites for all the hunters of the lineage. Dried snake heads, some herbs and other ingredients are ground into powder. The hunters sew this medicine up in small bags. Before the hunt the hunters lick it while some of it they dissolve in water which they rub on their feet and legs. They also give the dogs a rubdown. This medicine is believed to ‘paralyse’ the snakes rendering them harmless by the mere smell of it so that a hunter or a dog, even if they pass within a foot of the snake, will not be attacked. The snake will just lie there as if dead.

c) ‘Introducing’ a New Hunting Dog

Dogs are the right hand of a hunter. Hunting without dogs, when the only weapons are spears, is unthinkable. When a hunter buys a new dog it must be ‘introduced’; it must become part of the hunting ‘establishment’ of the community.

All hunters of a ‘side’ who have bought new dogs in preparation for the communal hunt gather on a promised day at the *dzok nyam*, each bringing a calabash of wine. Before they start to drink one of the senior huntmasters goes round spraying wine three times on the open upturned hands of each hunter who quickly closes them at each squirt as if trying to grab the wine. Then he wipes his hands along his arms flexing them several times. After this the wine drinking starts. This ritual is called *ruk wum ŋgbu* (wine hunting dog). Interestingly the dogs do not feature in this episode at all, which is surprising. Instead the owners of new dogs are ‘blessed’ by the huntmasters so that the dogs should hunt well. The dogs are treated later on during the ritual *zə koŋ* mentioned above.

d) ‘Locking the Foot of an Animal’ (*lokse ki nyam*)

When somebody on his road to the farm or the palm bush discovers the fresh spoor of a large animal, for example a bushcow, he takes his cutlass and pushing it under the spoor he lifts it up together with the soil placing it on a large leaf. The spoor must be kept intact. Then he takes it to one of the senior huntmasters who examines it, trying to identify the animal. The two senior huntmasters go to their hunting shrine (*dzok nyam*). There they make a ritual statement saying, ‘Wherever this animal has gone to, let it come back. If it has

gone to Mfumte or Bom, let it come back. May it fail to see a way ahead and turn back'. They accompany this invocation with blasts of the *tsə* horn. The *ngwa nyam* take the soil with the spoor and place it at the foot of the upright stone of the shrine covering it with a *mbəmbuəm* leaf and spraying wine over it. The ritual is intended to 'lock' the animal within the vicinity of the quarter. From the moment the ritual has been performed everyone will be on the look-out. As soon as the animal is spotted the alarm is sounded and all the hunters will surround the place and try to kill the animal. I was told that the junior huntmaster does not attend this ritual. He is not even allowed to 'see' it. I was given no reason for this prohibition.

10. Summary and Conclusion

In this chapter I have tried to show how closely the communal hunt among the Yamba is interconnected with the socio-economic, ritual and religious life of the community. It is impossible to treat hunting in isolation and only consider it as an economic activity, a mere quest for food. Its importance is not derived from its objective contribution to the food supply. Hunting among the Yamba has much wider social implications.

We have seen that the relationship within the family and the community must be in good order for safe and successful hunting. Breaches of the moral code, especially adulterous liaisons of the women of the quarter and sexual relations between male and female members of the lineage (the exogamous unit) are thought of as mystically dangerous offences causing hunting accidents. Neglect of affinal obligations on the part of the bride-receiver puts the success of the communal hunt in jeopardy. The beneficial role of the *nje'gu* may be reversed and become a threat to the fertility and welfare of the lineage and to success in hunting if the bride-receiver fails in his obligations. The blood of birth is another hazard which threatens the success of the communal hunt if it is not ritually redressed. Finally, the relationship between Z/DS (*monje'*) and MF/B (*tə'tsə*) bears on the hunting skill of the *monje'*. A *monje'* who respects his *tə'tsə* and gives him game meat is rewarded with a potent spear and 'blessed' so that he will have more success in hunting. But if the *tə'tsə* is slighted, his anger will spoil his *monje'*'s hunting skill.

In discussing the office of the huntmasters their crucial role in the communal hunt has become apparent. Through the performance of rituals and omen-taking they ensure a successful hunt and prevent supernatural sanctions from following the hunters to the hunting bush. They are in charge of the butchering of animals caught in the chase and of dividing the meat according to fixed rules.

In the main part of the chapter I have described the many hunting rituals which seem to take care of every aspect of the communal hunt. As regards exegesis I have tried to stick as close as possible to the explanations I have been given by my informants. My own contribution to the exegesis is minimal. It was my intention not to impose my interpretation but convey my informants' understanding of them.

Since hunting and hunting rituals have received so little attention in the literature of the Western Grassfields it is impossible to make a comparison between Yamba and other communities of the Western Grassfields. From the little that is available (and from my own personal experience) I would like to make one observation which struck me while researching into Yamba hunting rituals. In all the rituals hardly any mention is made of the ancestors. Hunt-masters and lineage heads when making their ritual statements usually call on the person from whom they have inherited the ritual office but only to state that should he want to spoil their efforts may bad luck follow him. No sacrifices, no libations are made to the ancestors to secure their assistance as has been reported from other communities of the Western Grassfields (e.g. Dillon 1990: 158-9). In Yamba religion ancestors receive little attention. Yamba seem to trust almost exclusively in the efficacy of their rituals without any recourse to their ancestors. Yamba society is one of the least 'ancestor-centred cultures' I have come across in my more than thirty years of working in the Grassfields. In this respect, the Yamba seem to be very similar to their northern neighbours, the Mfumte (Baeke 1984:156), or the Mambila to the east where 'the ancestors play a nugatory role' (Zeitlyn 1994: 70, 88).