

Chapter 5: 'Cooking the Grave' Aspects of Yamba Ritual Symbolism

Introduction

Yamba rituals show in an exemplary way how the Yamba see the world they live in and how they cope with the problems they are confronted with. Traditional Yamba belief accords great power and efficacy to their rituals. The underlying belief is 'that human will can be imposed upon reality and alter it for the better or worse' (E.M. Chilver 1990: 243). The rich ritual heritage of the Yamba has fascinated me ever since I started to work and live among them (since 1985). Despite exposure to western influences and the advent of schools and the World Religions these rituals are still performed whenever the need arises. Some of these rituals can be classified as 'rituals of affliction' (V. Turner), others as anti-pollution rituals, but some are more difficult to classify. Yamba refer to these rituals as *ncəp* ('medicine') and they call the ritual specialists or 'medicine men' *ŋga ncəp* (*ŋga* being a particle that associates people with things or attributes). When specifying, the word *ncəp* is replaced by the term for the particular ritual; thus *ŋga (lam) nfəssie* is the ritual specialist who 'cooks the grave', or *ŋga (dzəp) fe* is the 'medicine man' who officiates at the anti-pollution ritual.

In the following I shall give a detailed description of three Yamba rituals, viz. *lam nfəssie* ('cooking the grave'), *lam fua* ('cooking' the sexual transgression of adultery), and *dzəp fe* ('pounding the mistake'). The exegesis is that of my informants - ritual specialists and lay men. Since I want to record Yamba beliefs I have kept my own interpretations to a minimum. Because of the regional variations which exist especially between Upper and Lower Yamba, I restrict myself again to the practices of Nkwi, a quarter of Gom in Lower Yamba.

Lam nfəssie - 'Cooking the Grave'

Lam nfəssie can be classified in Victor Turner's terms as a ritual of affliction. It is performed to nullify or cancel 'bad words' or curses uttered by a recently dead man or woman in his/her lifetime. The dead are most dangerous in the years immediately following their burial. Sickness follows unfilial behaviour, proverbially represented as a refusal to give the father wine or game meat. When a son behaves 'as if he does not know his father' and the father disowns him, saying that when he dies the son may not touch any of his belongings,

the dead father would ‘come out’ of his grave and afflict the son, should the latter take his cutlass, knife, spear or any of his things. Divination will identify the offence and tell the son to *lam nfæssie*.

Let me give a real-life example. Tumnda (not his real name) was the second most senior man of a descent group. One of his daughters, Rimnda, got married to a man in Ngang. Some years later Rimnda met a man from Mbat in Sabongari where she had gone to buy dried fish. The man told her that he wanted to marry her and took the woman to Mbat. The first husband brought the case to court and the court issued a ‘convocation’ to the father of the woman. Tumnda called a meeting of all the men of the lineage. He proposed to the meeting that every man should contribute money so that the bridewealth could be refunded to his daughter’s first husband. Jumnking, another senior man of the descent group and third in line of succession to the headmanship, vehemently refused. He told the meeting that the man from Mbat should be summoned to court. If he wanted to marry Rimnda he should refund the ‘marriage cargo’ to her former husband. If he was unable to do so he should give the woman back to him. If the family were to refund the bridewealth it would set a bad example. All their *nje’gu* (female dependents of the lineage) would feel free to divorce their husbands on the slightest excuse. Tumnda was furious and said that he had wanted to ‘put Jumnking before’, to promote him to become the next lineage head when the present one who was old and blind, had died. But now should he dare to touch that chair when he, Tumnda, had died, he would ‘see’. Despite Jumnking’s objections the money was collected and refunded to the former husband of Rimnda. About two years later Tumnda suddenly died and the year after the lineage head too died. Jumnking was put on the chair as the new lineage head. Soon afterwards he fell seriously ill. Divination disclosed that the *nfæssie* of Tumnda had “come out and caught” him.

Sickness and personal misfortune divined to have been caused by the ‘grave’ of a recently dead man usually arise from tensions in the relationship between father and son, between members of the lineage and its headman, between a *nje’gu* and her father/brother, or between in-laws. In the last case, the affliction always follows the children of the bride-receiver.

According to Pa Monday Kongnjo of Gom, it is the witches, always present and on the look out for something they could use to harm other people, who keep the memory of the deceased’s ‘bad words’ alive. Later on, when the person against whom these words have been uttered acts in disregard of them, the witches would report it to the dead man in his grave who, in turn, would ‘come out’ and afflict him.

1.1. The Performance of the Ritual

A goat, a fowl, a calabash of wine and a spear have to be given by the afflicted person. The performance takes place in front of the sick person's house, except for the final episode called *təm nzəp nfəssie* (sprinkle 'cool water' - *nfəssie*) which is done at the actual grave of the recently dead man. A makeshift fireplace is arranged by putting three stones to support the small earthenware cooking pot used for the ritual.

On the day of the ritual, the medicine man, *ŋga nfəssie*, comes with a bundle of special leaves. Since the leaves are always the same but the illness may be different in each case when a person is afflicted by the 'grave', it is clear that the leaves are not used for their medicinal but rather for their 'magical' properties. There are five different leaves used, but I was unable to identify them.

The officiant is given a spear which he pins to the ground next to the hearth stones. In all Yamba rituals a spear has to be given and stuck into the ground at the place where the ritual is performed. Nobody could give me a satisfactory answer as to why the spear had to be given. One informant suggested that this was the spear which the ritual specialist took along to bush when he went to collect the leaves. The spear is part of the payment he receives. Jikong (1979: 81) states that 'while the pot is on the fire, the officiating priest pierces the ground with a spear after having pronounced the name of the dead person'.

All people of the lineage and other people of the hamlet gather around either to witness or participate in the ritual. Three stools are brought for the three main performers: the medicine man, the lineage head and the afflicted person. If the latter is unable to get up from his sickbed by himself, he will be carried outside. The three stools are arranged in such a way that each person sits opposite a gap between the stones of the fireplace.

Next, the ritual specialist is given a fowl. He tears open its beak and lets the blood drop on the three stones, after which the fowl is put aside. Then the specialist sprays wine from his mouth on the three stones. The blood of the fowl and the wine are meant to 'cool' the fireplace. We will see another reason below. Then the medicine man gets up and, holding the bundle of leaves in his left hand and a knife in his right, he makes a ritual invocation. He calls the name of his late father (or the person from whom he inherited the 'medicine') saying that he has shown him this 'medicine' (*ncəp*) which he is now about to perform. If he wants to spoil it because he has died and begrudges him the wine he drinks and the fowl he eats then *kanfe lo ba wu* (may bad luck follow

him). Saying this he chops off some bits of the leaves and throws them over his shoulder to the west. Then he continues, ‘As we are alive we look towards the sun. May this ritual which I perform now be successful.’ Again he chops off some bits of leaves and throws them towards the east.²⁸

Then the ritual specialist sits down and still holding the bundle of leaves in his hand calls on all people present to tell what they know about the case. Every speaker comes forward and, stroking the leaves, they repeat the ‘bad words’ and the reason which let the deceased person to utter them. The lineage head and the sick person speak last. The medicine man hands the bundle of leaves and the knife to the lineage head who cuts up part of the leaves while repeating the ‘bad words’ of the deceased. When he has finished, the officiant takes the leaves and hands them to the afflicted person who does the same. The officiant cuts up the rest of the leaves. This episode signifies that the ‘bad words’ of the dead man must be made present again. They ‘enter’ the bundle of leaves which are cut into the pot.

Now the *nga ncəp* takes a sip of wine and holding the pot up in the air he blows wine under its base three times. I was told that this is done to make the pot ‘light’. The leaves in the pot should boil easily and quickly. Putting the pot down and still holding it the two persons next to him touch his arms while all people present form a human chain, each person touching the person next to him. By doing this all participants want to show their sincere wish that the ‘medicine’ should be successful and the sick man recover.

As all present form a human chain, the officiant lifts the pot up as if to place it on the three stones only to withdraw it again. While doing this he says, ‘*Kuŋ ya?*’ (Pot for what?). All people answer, ‘*Kuŋ nfəssie*’. He repeats this a second time. The third time he says, ‘*Kuŋ nfəssie cum*, - ‘to which people answer, ‘*coŋ!*’ (May the pot of *nfəssie* sit — peacefully!). With this the pot is placed on the stones. Now water and wine are poured into the pot and the fire lit. As firewood only dry, shredded raffia poles are used. Each of the three persons at the fire place controls his own side making sure that the fire burns well and pushing in the bamboo whenever the fire goes down. Senior men who are in possession of a *ŋkey* stick (‘confession stick’) put them in the pot to ‘recharge’ them.

28. For a short description of *lam nfəssie* and the accompanying ritual invocation as practised in Jato, a quarter of Gwembu down in the Mbo plain, see Jikong 1979: 80-83.

The pot is watched closely. If all the ‘bad words’ uttered by the deceased have been brought back again, as it were, and have ‘entered’ the leaves, all three sides inside the pot will start to boil. If one side does not ‘wake up’ it may mean several things. Should the side of the sick person not boil it is taken to mean that some information is still concealed by him. The same holds good for the lineage head. If the side of the medicine man does not wake up it may mean that he has a hidden grudge against the descent group. He may have performed a ritual for them in the past and they have failed to pay him. In any case, the procedure is interrupted and a *ηkey* stick produced. The person whose side did not boil has to speak again or confess the hidden grudge while scraping the stick. The wood dust is then knocked off the stick into the pot. But usually all three sides boil which means that the ‘medicine’ has been successful.

There are regional variations. In Ngwen, a ‘compound’ (*bu’lak*) of Sang Quarter of Gom, for example, the pot has to boil over in order for the rite to be successful. When this happens the participants give a loud shout — haaaa!

By way of exegesis I was told that the ‘bad words’ uttered by the deceased are ‘hot’. It is not enough just to repeat them. In order to make them ‘hot’ again the leaves containing them have to boil so that subsequently they can be ‘cooled’ and thus cancelled.

The fowl whose beak has been torn is now killed and its feathers burnt off. The medicine man cuts it lengthwise into two halves. He removes the gizzard and cuts it open placing its content on a *mbambuəm* leaf which he keeps aside. He puts half the fowl with the head attached in his bag (as part of his pay), the other half is cut up finely, bone and all, and put in the pot. Oil and salt are added and the *ηkey* sticks which were placed in the pot earlier on are used to stir the stew. When the food is done the pot is removed from the fire in exactly the same way as it was put on the fire stones. The content is poured on a large banana or plantain leaf and divided among all present. The people eat the ‘soup’ with fufu.

This commensality shows again that all participants are united in their wish to cancel the ‘bad words’ of the deceased and to ‘send him back into the grave’ so that the sick person may recover. Boiling the leaves has rendered the ‘bad words’ harmless and they are ‘consumed’ by all present and thus got rid of. If one of the participants discovers a piece of bone in his share he will not discard it. Rather, he will put it in his purse. Should he later on be led into an argument with somebody, provoking his anger in such a way that it would demand the *ηkey* treatment, he would remove the piece of bone and, repeating

the ‘vex talk’ when alone, bite off a splinter and eat it. This, I was told, has the same effect as if the rite called scraping the *ŋkey* stick was performed for him.

Next, the goat is killed, its hair singed off and it is butchered. The meat is divided among the members of the descent group. Here again there are variations. In Nkwi the goat is not killed straight away but the following day or at a later date. In Sang, on the other hand, the goat must be killed there and then as part of the ritual. The blood of the goat is said to ‘cool’ the grave. Or, as one informant put it, ‘It pushes the grave-dweller back into the grave sealing it so that he cannot come out again and afflict people.’

After the people have eaten the ‘medicine’ and drunk the wine, the officiant takes the *mbambuəm* leaf with the content of the fowl’s gizzard, adds riverine worm-cast to it and sprays wine over it. He anoints all the participants on the sternum with the mixture (*be yo nca’ nfässie*) starting with the afflicted person. Then holding the *mbambuəm* leaf with the rest of the mixture in his hand — or, in another version, holding the blooded banana leaves on which the goat had been butchered — the specialist makes a ritual statement saying, ‘We have cooked *nfässie* today. Let the grave-dweller lick the blood of the goat and go back. He must not put his eyes outside the grave again. We have made his grave cool. As we have cooked *nfässie* today are we going to cook it twice?’ People say no. ‘As we have cooked it, will the man be sick again?’ People say no. ‘If somebody comes out as witch and tries to open the case again what will happen to him?’ People say, ‘He will die!’ With this he knocks the blooded leaves on the ground three times. Finally, he takes the *mbambuəm* leaf and slams it face down in the centre of the fire place. I was told that the grave-dwellers would come out the following night to check. When they see the blood of the fowl on the three fire stones, the *mbambuəm* leaf in the centre of the fire place and the blooded leaves on which the goat had been killed they would lick the blood and go back into their graves satisfied.

In this episode the ‘cooling’ aspect comes to the fore. Riverine worm-cast (*ndu*) is a paradigm of coolness. The spraying of wine on the mixture on the *mbambuəm* leaf has the same effect. The ‘hot words’ are not only cooled but at the same time ‘locked’ by slamming the *mbambuəm* leaf face down in the centre of the fire place. The *mbambuəm* leaf is used in many rituals in Lower Yamba, always in the context of locking something. In the Yamba twin ritual the eyes of twins are locked (*fopke moa*) by placing a *mbambuəm* leaf over the face of the twins because they are believed to have ‘two eyes’ (*lis baa* — see Chapter Six). I have already mentioned the Yamba hunting ritual called *lokse ki nyam*, in which the huntmasters will ‘lock’ the animal whose spoor has

been spotted in the vicinity of the village, so that it can be killed. The soil with the imprint of the animal's foot is placed at the *dzok nyam* (hunting shrine) and covered with a *mbambuəm* leaf (see Chapter Three). Many more examples could be given.

1.1. *Təm nɛp nfəssie* — Sprinkling 'cool water' of *nfəssie*

Next, the medicine man is given a calabash bowl in which he places some leaves and adds water. One of the leaves is called *wase*. When crushed and mixed with water it turns the water into a gelatinous liquid. It is also used in *təm nɛp ɲwantap* (sprinkle 'cool water' *ɲwantap*). The medicine man now sprinkles the people present with the 'cool water'. Then he goes to the actual grave where the deceased has been buried. Somebody warns the people to avert their faces or cover their eyes. Nobody may watch the officiant while he is busy at the burial ground. As he stands over the grave, turning the leaves inside the calabash bowl, he makes a ritual statement saying, for example, 'Your son said that you two did not get on well together. He did not give you game meat, he did not bring you wine. He behaved as if he didn't know you as his father. You were annoyed with him saying that he must never touch any of your things after you had died. Now you have died and he did touch your things. That's why you came out and afflicted him. But now we have cooked your *nfəssie*. We have cooled the case. Don't open your eyes to look upwards again. Turn your face downwards.' Saying this he pours the medicated water on the grave and flicks his fingernail against the calabash bowl three times. This last episode signifies that as the medicine man has put the calabash face down on the grave so the grave-dweller should sleep in the grave in the same position. He should not lift up his eyes again to look outside the grave. The grave has been made 'cool' and has been sealed.

Instead of the complete rite of *lam nfəssie* this last component *təm nɛp nfəssie* is performed in minor cases of affliction or to prevent a foreseen affliction. As for the reason why nobody is allowed to watch the medicine man perform at the grave (although everybody knows what he is doing and they hear the ritual statement) I was told the following: what comes out of the grave is the dead man's shadow (*ma-lululi, ma-tsəntsən*). This same shadow is the part of man which 'enters' the corpse at death. It is said that when a man dies and he is put on the *ntəŋ* (a wooden bamboo structure) no shadow would be seen. This is taken as a sign that the man is really dead (for more details see Chapter Eight). It is the task of the medicine man to send back the deceased person's shadow into the grave. Yamba believe that to see the dead man's shadow would result in more afflictions; the person seeing it could even die. Nsan-

gong of Mfe had his own ideosyncratic version. He said, 'If you take a pocket mirror and hold it in such a way that you can see the grave you would behold the dead man sitting there as if alive'. But, he added, he dare not do it because, if he did, 'his life would be short'.

In former times, if the family had been afflicted by the same deceased person several times and he continued to come out although his grave had been 'cooked' a number of times, his skull would be dug up by the medicine man and thrown unceremoniously into the river. This would finish the matter once and for all.

To come back to my real-life example. I met Jumnking a few days after the performance of the ritual. He was still very weak but he was up and about. He told me that on the night following the ritual he had a dream. He saw some people standing at his bedside whispering. Then he felt as if somebody had splashed water on his chest. He woke up and touched the place but there was no water. Wondering about the meaning of the dream he fell asleep again. In the morning he was able to get up on his own for the first time in weeks.

2. *Lam fua'* (*nforo*) — 'Cooking the Sexual Transgression of Adultery'

The ritual *lam fua'* is another 'ritual of affliction'. In Upper Yamba it is called *lam nforo*. If a woman married according to the Yamba marriage system (*ywin ngwe* — buy wife) commits adultery her children may fall sick and die or her husband may have an accident. The affliction is believed to be caused by *nwantap*, the most important cult of the Yamba.

I have described the marriage system in Chapter Two of this book. Let me summarize the most important features which concern us here. The Yamba marriage system includes both bridewealth and gifts and services. After having completed the bride services and feasting gifts the husband, in Lower Yamba, is urged to 'buy' his wife (*ywin ngwe*). When he brings the money, the lineage head of the groom's family will place an old marriage shovel (*so*)²⁹ on the ground covering the money. Then he makes a ritual invocation saying that today they have bought this woman according to the law of their ancestors. Now both lineage heads, that is the bride-giver and the bride-receiver, place their right foot on the shovel and spray wine over it three times. These lineage heads are at the same time heads of the *nwantap* cult of their respective lineages. This action brings the marriage under the laws of *nwantap*. One of the

29. Up to the 1960s, bride wealth among the Yamba was paid in so-called marriage shovels (*so*); see Chapter Two.

main laws concerns the prohibition against adultery by the wife. From now on the wife is prohibited under pain of supernatural sanctions to have sexual relations with any man other than her husband. Adultery of the wife is believed to mainly affect her children. As one informant told me with a hint of resignation in his voice, ‘All these things are looking for the children!’ But the husband may also be affected. He may have an accident when hunting³⁰ or fall off a palm tree. If the wife has no children it may affect her too, but this is said to be rare. The channel through which misfortune passes to husband or children is the food prepared by the unfaithful wife and mother. Divination will reveal the transgression and accuse the wife in somewhat veiled terms saying that the wife should ‘say something with her mouth’ or that ‘*ɲwantap* is in her house’. As soon as the husband finds out that his wife has been unfaithful he will refuse to eat food prepared by her and to sleep with her till the day the ritual *lam fua*’ has been performed. It is interesting to note that if a man commits adultery he is not afflicted. I was told that *ɲwantap* does not ‘catch’ a man.

A married woman accused of the sexual transgression of adultery must confess the names of all her lovers. If the offence was committed inside the hamlet, the woman will go and see the man concerned and ask him to give a fowl. This fowl is used to ‘fix’ *ɲwantap* (*fise ɲwantap* — to appease *ɲwantap*). He has to give another fowl and a goat for the *lam fua*’ ritual. Later on, the cuckolded husband will take his *tɛ̀tsə* (MF/B) to the adulterer to ask for *lip co* (*lip* means to beat; *co* translates as cargo, wealth). The latter has to give another goat and some money which the husband gives to his *tɛ̀tsə* in lieu of *kəa nɛəm*, a payment normally given to him by the family at the death of his *monjɛ*’ (D/ZS).

All these payments or fines become redundant if the wife committed adultery with a man from another hamlet or village. In such a case the husband has to provide the two fowls and one goat in order to *fise ɲwantap* and *lam fua*’. If the woman has confessed and publicly named the man she had sexual relations with inside the hamlet the adulterer is under great public pressure to pay the fines. Should he deny that he had anything to do with the woman and refuse to pay the fine he would be in danger of supernatural sanctions himself and would be held responsible for the death of the woman’s children.

30. For precautions taken against supernatural sanctions threatening the hunters because of sexual transgressions of married women of the hamlet, see Chapter Three.

2.1. *Füise ηwantap — to appease ηwantap*

There are two stages in the ritual resolution of adultery committed by a wife. The first stage concerns the *ηwantap* cult. A law of *ηwantap* has been broken, so *ηwantap* has to be appeased. The wife is taken by her husband to the leader of the *ηwantap* cult (who is always the lineage head). She is told to name all her lovers. If she does not remember all the names or she has committed adultery with strangers, she will first of all call the names of those she knows. Then she will take a bundle of grass, divide it into several parts according to the number of men she slept with but whose names she does not know and tell the people, ‘Of these men I don’t know the names. I slept with them as if they were grass.’ Accompanied by shouts of — Ooooooh! Haaa! — she runs along the paths leading out of the compound throwing the grass away. After this she is asked to bring a fowl, either given by her lover, if he is a man from the hamlet, or by her husband. The head of the *ηwantap* cult takes the fowl by its legs and brushes it over the face of the woman three times. This signifies the ‘extraction’ or exorcism of the sexual transgression from the wife. Then he climbs onto the loft where the *ηwantap* sacra are kept. Tearing open the beak of the fowl he lets some blood drop on the *ηwantap*. Since *ηwantap* has tasted the blood of the fowl it will now desist from afflicting the children (or the husband). The fowl is roasted and eaten by the members of the *ηwantap* cult.

Next, the head of the *ηwantap* cult puts water and some leaves, among them wase and *ηghu ndzoη*, in a calabash bowl and turning and crushing them in the water he makes a ritual invocation saying that the woman has confessed her ‘mistake’ and has brought a fowl to appease *ηwantap*. *ηwantap* must leave her children now and they will get well. Then he sprinkles the ‘cool water’ (*təm nzəp ηwantap*) on the woman’s chest three times. It should be noted that the ritual is performed not to punish the offender but rather to establish and uphold the moral code of behaviour.

2.2. The Ritual *lam fua*’

On the same day, or soon afterwards, the husband will arrange for the performance of the ritual *lam fua*’. He has to provide a goat, a fowl, wine, a spear, a bottle of oil and salt. The spear is stuck in the ground next to the fireplace. The ritual takes place in front of the husband’s house. Three stools are placed around the fireplace for the three main participants, the medicine man, the husband and the wife, in the same manner as for *lam nfəssie*. All the members of the descent group and some people from other compounds gather for the ritual.

The ritual specialist, *ɲga lam fua*, brings a bundle of special leaves. The ritual invocation and the throwing of bits of leaves to the west and the east are the same as in *lam nfæssie*. He hands the leaves to the husband who cuts part of the bundle into the small earthenware pot saying, 'I cut this *fua*' because my wife has been unfaithful. This has provoked *ɲwantap* and *ɲwantap* has caught her. I'm a man of *ɲwantap* too. So I "cook" this *fua*' so that *ɲwantap* should leave us.' Then he hands the leaves back to the medicine man who gives them to the wife. The wife cuts part of the bundle saying that she has made a mistake and that she is sorry. *ɲwantap* should leave her so that the children may get well. Any other married man may ask to cut part of the leaves into the pot, 'because one never knows how one's wife or wives are behaving'. The medicine man cuts up the rest of the leaves and pours water and wine into the pot. Lifting the pot up he blows wine on the underside of the pot. The placing of the pot on the fire while the people present form a human chain is done in the same way as in *lam nfæssie*. The fire is lit and the three people sitting around the fireplace must take care that their own side is burning well. The ritual is successful if all the three sides inside the pot boil. Should the side of the wife refuse to 'wake up' it means that she has not confessed all the names of her lovers. If the side of the husband does not boil it means that he may still harbour a grudge against his wife. It may be that he wanted to drive her away. A *ɲkey* stick is produced and confessing his grudge he scrapes it. The wood dust is then knocked off into the pot.

The fowl whose beak had been torn open to let blood drop on the three fire stones at the beginning of the ritual is now killed and the feathers singed off. The officiant cuts it lengthwise in two halves putting the half with the head into his bag and cutting up the other half into small pieces which are put in the pot. When the food is done the pot is removed in the same way as described above and its content turned out onto a plantain or banana leaf.

Now the medicine man snips off some hair from the man's armpits, from above the forehead and the pubic area. He cuts the same from the woman. Then he scrapes both their finger- and toenails. The bits of hair and the nail scrapings he mixes into a small lump of fufu together with some of the boiled leaves. Next, he forms six balls out of the lump of fufu. Husband and wife cross their right hands at the wrist. The officiant places a ball on each hand. The husband eats from the wife's hand and the wife from the husband's hand. This is done three times. Finally, the rest of the 'medicine' is divided among all present; they eat it with fufu. The eating from each other's hands of food mixed with body hair and nail scrapings brings husband and wife together

again. The husband may now safely eat food prepared by his wife and sleep with her again.

When people have eaten the food and drunk the wine, the ritual specialist takes the *mbambuəm* leave on which he has placed the contents of the fowl's gizzard. He adds riverine worm-cast and wine and mixes everything well. Pressing his thumb into the mixture he applies it first on the chest of the husband and the wife and then all people present are marked in the same way. When he has finished he stands up and holding the leaf he says, 'I have "cooked" *fua*'. The woman has made a mistake. Her children are sick because she has committed adultery. But now I have joined them "for one place again". *Fua*' has left them. I have "cooled" it and "killed" it. They have eaten (together). *Fua*' will not trouble them again.' With these words he slams the *mbambuəm* leaf down on the centre of the fireplace.

The predominant ritual symbolism in the two rituals *lam nfæssie* and *lam fua*' is once more the thermal contrast between hot and cold. Both the 'bad words' and the sexual transgression of adultery are hot. The rituals are performed to cool them and so end the affliction. This is achieved by symbolically making present or bringing back again the 'bad words' or the sexual transgression by speaking them into the leaves. The boiling of the leaves makes the heat visible and shows at the same time that nothing has been concealed. Having symbolically reproduced the same condition as when the actions actually happened they are now 'cooled' and thus cancelled. Consequently the affliction should automatically cease. All things being equal the afflicted person or the sick children should get well even without any further treatment.

3. *Dzəp fε* - 'Pounding the Mistake'

Dzəp fε is a ritual of pollution cleansing. *Dzəp* means to pound. The meaning of *fε* is more problematic. Literally it means mistake. It can refer to simple mistakes one makes in everyday life, like forgetting to do something or doing a different thing from that which one should have done. Sometimes it is also used to describe the breaking of an oath one has made privately. This may cause affliction to the person concerned and calls for the *ŋkey* treatment. But the meaning of *fε* which concerns us here is associated with pollution, a type of mystical danger that will affect the whole descent group or even the whole hamlet and which calls for ritual cleansing. Deaths by suicide, burning in a fire, drowning or somebody being killed in a hunting accident are such pollut-

ing events. The mystical danger coming from such deaths is believed to be contagious, like a contagious disease. If the proper ritual is not performed people would die one after the other. *Fε* would kill them.

Deaths which cause situations of ritual pollution are different from ‘bad deaths’. Deaths caused by leprosy, epilepsy and swollen belly are ‘bad deaths’. People who die a ‘bad death’ are buried in the bush by ritual specialists who have the ‘medicine’ required and therefore the power to dispose of the corpses without being affected by them. No death celebrations are held for such deaths. But they do not cause pollution and the *dzəp fε* ritual is not performed. On the other hand, people who commit suicide, burn to death in a fire, or drown, and those accidentally killed are buried in the compound and their deaths are ‘cried’.

Suicides are very rare among the Yamba. In the many years I have been living and working among them I have only heard of two cases, both of them by hanging. If somebody commits suicide by hanging the same ritual specialist as he who also performs the anti-pollution ritual is called. Only he may cut the rope. The family is not allowed to cut the rope or to the corpse. The dead person is buried by the ritual specialist and his people who are protected by their ‘medicine’, but the family may help in digging the grave. When the ritual *dzəp fε* is performed all the members of the descent group, men, women, and children, but also all people who saw the person hanging, will attend. I was told that in Nkwi the whole hamlet attends as a matter of course.

Drowning accidents happen every year in Yamba during the height of the rainy season when people try to cross the swollen mountain rivers. People who witness somebody being carried away by the river are the ones who are in the greatest danger of being affected by the ensuing pollution. But all the members of the drowned person’s lineage are equally in danger. When the body is discovered — not all of them are — it is carried to the compound of the deceased and buried there.

A death by fire, whether in a house or in a bushfire, also calls for the performance of the anti-pollution ritual. But if only the house or the compound burns it is not believed to be polluting. Violent deaths resulting from a fight or a hunting accident belong to the same category of deaths causing mystical danger both to the person who killed the man and his family, and to the family of the dead man.

If somebody has killed a person in war or, to take a recent example, a Yamba soldier had killed somebody in the Bakassi peninsula border conflict between Cameroon and Nigeria, he would first have to ‘enter’ *nzɔr* (the red

feather society), a measure which is both protective and prestigious, before undergoing a modified version of the *dzəp fɛ* ritual together with the members of his family. Failure to do so would cause everybody to be afflicted by a serious cough, but people would not die since the killing happened outside the Yamba area.

Death by falling off a tree does not give rise to pollution nor does death by lightning. But there are regional differences. Pa Njabuin of Mfe, himself a *ŋga fɛ*, told me that if lightning kills somebody in the house the family will find out through divination whether the lightning has been ‘sent’ by somebody or not. If it has been ‘sent’, that is, if it has been caused by a human agent, the family will have to *dzəp fɛ*. But most of my informants insisted that although all deaths by lightning are ‘sent’, they do not cause pollution and the ritual *dzəp fɛ* is not performed.

Pa Njabuin gave me another interesting example. A girl engaged to a young man who was away working in Douala got pregnant by another man. The mother of the girl, very much ashamed and afraid that the young man would refuse to marry her daughter if he got to know about it, bought some medicine on the advice of a member of the medical staff of the local government hospital. The girl aborted and the mother, with her own hands, buried the unborn child (which, among the Yamba, is a very serious matter in itself). True enough, the mother fell sick soon afterwards. Neither ‘country medicine’ nor treatment sought at the Health Centre did her any good. A diviner was consulted and divination said, ‘*Fɛ!*’ Pa Njabuin was called in and he questioned the mother thoroughly so as to get all the facts. Only when she admitted to having actually bought the medicine and given it to her daughter to cause the abortion, was he satisfied and then made *dzəp fɛ*. He told me that one has to be very careful. If the medicine man makes the ‘medicine’ for the wrong reasons or for the wrong people it would attack him and kill him. When I discussed this with Sam Kobuin of Nkwi he said that in Lower Yamba the mother of the girl would have to *fiise ŋwantap* and pay a fine of a goat to the *ndo kie* (a fertility cult) because she has ‘scattered’ the *mbaŋ moa* (eggs, children): these are the smooth round pebbles littering the *dzok kie*, the fertility shrine of the hamlet.

3.1. The *dzəp fɛ* ritual

When a death believed to be causing ritual pollution has occurred the ritual specialist *ŋga fɛ* is called. The ritual takes place in the compound of the killer or of the deceased in case of a suicide, or death by burning or drowning. The medicine man comes with a bundle of special leaves. A fire is lit in the yard

and next to it a spear is stuck in the ground, as usual. The officiant, the killer or the people who have witnessed the accidental death sit around the fire. A goat, a fowl and calabashes of wine have to be given, either by the killer or the family of the deceased.

The first step concerns the killing of the goat. The goat is brought, its four legs tied together and the head bent towards the legs and also securely tied to prevent it from crying out. Now the officiant sharpens a bamboo and places the pointed end on the spot where he normally would pierce the skin to reach the heart of the goat. But he does not do so. Instead all people present surround the goat and beat it with their bare hands until it is dead. While doing so they shout, '*O fe, o fe, o fe!*' The manner in which the goat is killed is significant. It is not killed with a knife but beaten to death without spilling blood. Suicides, deaths by hanging or fire, and hunting accidents are all 'violent' deaths. Yamba ritual symbolism demands that the original violence is symbolically brought back or made present again. This is accomplished by the beating to death of the goat with bare hands, another 'violent' death. Having recreated the original violence the pollution can now be cleansed. Thus the mystical danger is cut off at its source.

The goat is then butchered and the meat divided. One leg, the head and the heart go to the medicine man; the rest is shared among all the participants. The content of the first stomach (*tup*), i.e. the rumen of the goat, is removed, placed on a leaf and kept aside. Next, the ritual specialist takes the fowl, tears its beak and lets some blood drop on the bundle of leaves. The leaves are then burnt to ashes. As the leaves burn all people present step over the fire and the rising smoke. The smoke of the burning 'medicine' is believed to 'cool' the compound. After this the fowl is killed and its feathers are singed off. The ashes of the feathers are thus joined to the ashes of the leaves. The fowl is taken by the medicine man as part of his pay. Then he grinds the ashes into fine powder and places them on a *mbambuəm* leaf. He adds salt and oil before inviting all participants to come and lick the 'medicine'. The rest is kept by the lineage head to give to members of his family living outside Yamba area when they next visit the village.

Now the *nga fe* takes the leaf on which he has placed the content of the gizzard of the fowl and the *tup* of the goat. He adds riverine worm-cast and wine and mixes everything thoroughly. Then he marks all those present on the chest with the mixture. Next, the killer or those who witnessed the drowning or first saw the hanging man receive a special treatment. They are not only marked on their chests but are also given a small quantity of the mixture to eat. One informant confided to me that the medicine man dips a stick into the

compound latrine and touches the mixture, thus adding human faeces to it, unknown to the people. He said that this was necessary because ‘it kills everything’. But I was unable to get other informants to confirm this.

Finally, holding the leaf with the rest of the mixture in his hands he makes a ritual statement saying, for example, ‘Did you not call me to make *dzəp fe?* You told me that your compound was “bad” because you have killed a person. I have done everything which you have called me to do. I have “fixed” everything. The man who has made the “mistake”, let it not affect him again. As I have come and made *dzəp fe*, will the compound still be “hot”?’ They say no. ‘Did I not “cool” it?’ They answer, ‘You did’. He may repeat the last question three times before slamming down the leaf in the centre of the fireside. He places a small stone on it and blows wine over it three times.

Violent deaths including deaths by drowning and fire, and suicides are feared by the Yamba because such deaths are believed to return and affect others. But unlike the Mankon (Warnier 1975: 128-9) who believe that actions involving bodily or property damage ‘cause a pollution to enter the ground or the place where it was committed - (which) will come out of the ground and provoke other mishaps, usually of the same nature as the first one, until the ground is cleansed’, the Yamba are much more pragmatic. For them it is not some undefined, mystical something that enters the ground in order to come out again but rather the *nfəssie* (‘grave’) of the deceased. As one informant told me, ‘The *nfəssie* of the deceased cries, “You have killed me!” It is this *nfəssie* that comes out to afflict people’. Does this indicate that we are dealing here with a kind of corporate guilt? Is the descent group somehow responsible for such violent deaths? It is quite clear that somebody does not hang himself for no reason. Often such a person is driven by despair into killing himself. If the co-residents had been more caring and helpful the person concerned might have been prevented from taking such a drastic step. In a sense, one could postulate an indirect responsibility on the side of the descent group in all such polluting deaths. That is what I take my informant’s statement to mean when he lets the deceased cry, ‘You have killed me!’ The deceased will be restless in his grave and come out to afflict people till the anti-pollution ritual has been performed. This point is further supported by the statement of the officiant in his final ritual invocation, when he says, ‘Your compound was “bad” because you have killed a person’. The accusing finger is clearly pointed at the descent group as a whole. Violent deaths do not happen for no reason. Another clear example would be a fatal hunting accident. As I have mentioned already (see above and also Chapter Three) such a death was believed to have been caused by sexual transgressions, especially adultery of

a wife. Violent and accidental deaths disrupt the corporate spirit of the descent group: the disruption is metaphorically conceived as pollution. The *dzəp fe* ritual is performed to redress the situation. The emphasis on commensality — the licking of the ‘medicine’, the drinking of the palm wine, the sharing of the goat meat — makes it clear that the ritual is meant to restore the unity of the descent group and to uphold its social norms. The joint action of the beating to death of the goat has the same purpose. Everybody is united in the wish to ‘exorcise’ the pollution because everybody is in danger of being afflicted.

4. Some Conclusions

In this chapter I have set out a few of the animating ideas of Yamba ritual symbolism to the extent they were explained to me. Foremost among them has been the hot/cold contrast. In the three rituals described the heat caused by ‘bad words’, the sexual transgression of adultery by wives, or violent deaths, had to be cooled by the performance of an appropriate ritual. The mechanism used is similar in the three rituals: the original situation which caused the ‘heat’ in the first place has to be symbolically re-created or made present again so that it can be cooled and the mystical danger cut off at its source.

There are a number of ‘cooling’ devices used in all Yamba rituals: riverine wormcast (*ndu*), palm wine (*ruk*), water (*nzəp*), the content of a fowl’s gizzard (*siŋ mvəp*) or the goat’s rumen (*tup*), and the blood of fowls and goats. In contrast, other Yamba rituals are intended to have the opposite effect, to make things ‘hot’. This is the case in many of the hunting rituals which are performed to make the communal hunt ‘hot’, for instance in the case of *kokse koŋ*, when the hunters may only drink hot wine, or in that of *zə koŋ*, where the spears are held over the rising smoke in order to ‘sharpen’ them and make them ‘hot’. Malagueta pepper (*swi co*) used in these rituals has the same effect (see Chapter Three). Temporary impotence or a woman failing to see her period, states referred to as ‘cool’, are treated by ‘entering’ those affected into the *dzok co* cult. They are given hot wine to drink in which the bark of a certain tree and the corm of a river plant has been heated. The dominant symbol used to ‘lock’ things, as we have seen in the above rituals, is the *mbəmbuəm* leaf in Lower Yamba. One finds this large, heart-shaped and pleasantly scented leaf figuring in many Yamba rituals — for example in the Yamba twin ritual (see Chapter Six), in hunting rituals (Chapter Three), or when young boys are initiated into a cult (Chapter Seven). Placing the calabash bowl face down on the grave is another ‘locking’ symbol.

The corporate nature of Yamba rituals is also an important feature. All members of a descent group, sometimes even the whole hamlet, take part. The emphasis on commensality and the forming of a human chain signify that all participants are united in the wish that the ritual should be effective and the afflicted person should get well. Rituals are not an occasion to punish an offender but to uphold and re-state the moral code of the community. The well-being of the community depends on the observance of the moral code by each individual and any breach by an individual affects the community as a whole.

I have made little headway in eliciting the symbolic meaning of the leaves used, especially those cut into the pot or burnt in the fire. I had the same experience when I made a study of the Yamba twin ritual (see Chapter Six). Although I was shown all the leaves and told their names in Yamba I was unable to get any information about their symbolic properties.

It will have been noticed that no mention has been made of colours. This is simply because my informants never referred to any colour as being significant. From my many years living and working among the Yamba I can only say that colours play little or no part in Yamba symbolism. As regards numbers, only the number three crops up time and again. Many ritual actions are done three times but no indication could be found that this is the male number. One ritual specialist who is a Christian has given me his own re-interpretation of the number three. For him it refers to the number of divine Persons in the Trinity — God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. When he performs a ritual action three times he does it in the name of the Trinity (consonantly with the practice of the Catholic Church, where prayers start with the Sign of the Cross).

I mentioned earlier that Yamba belief accords great power and efficacy to their rituals. But why do they believe their rituals to be effective? An analysis of ritual invocations made by lineage heads and ritual specialists may help us to get a clearer understanding. Lineage heads and ritual specialists make ritual statements accompanied by libations or food offerings (or offerings of bits of leaves as we have seen above) whenever they perform a ritual. They call the names of those ancestors they have succeeded or from whom they have inherited the 'medicine'. These ritual statements, libations and food offerings are not supplications to the ancestors for help. They are ambiguous. First of all, they are what I would call, in approximation to Fardon's (1990) 'protestations of ignorance', 'protestations of legitimacy'. Stating the reason for the gathering the lineage head or ritual specialist calls the name(s) of his predecessor(s) saying that he is doing the very same thing that he has seen them do. He has

not seized this office by force. It was given to him and he has paid his dues. In other words, he has a right to do it. If now the ancestor asks why he is doing it, 'why he is drinking wine and eating fowls' (as his rightful payment), if, in short, the ancestor is questioning his legitimacy for doing what he does, then 'bad luck should follow him (the ancestor)' - *kaŋ fe lo ba wu!* With these words he throws wine (or food, or leaves) over his shoulder to the west. There is no question of reverently pouring wine from his cup onto the grave of the ancestor!

Having protested his legitimacy he goes on to say that he is doing exactly the same thing he has seen the ancestor do. Corresponding to the 'protestation of legitimacy' this can be called a 'protestation of correctness'. The officiant is not inventing a new thing. He has inherited the ritual from the ancestor. It has been handed on from one lineage head or ritual specialist to the next since time immemorial. If the lineage head or ritual specialist does it now in exactly the same way as he has seen his predecessor do it, it must work as it worked for him. The legitimacy of the officiant and the correct performance of the ritual make the ritual effective.

The second part of ritual invocations is concerned with the living. The phrasing is often indirect: 'May all things do well, crops yield abundantly, etc.' Sometimes God is invoked directly, 'May God bless this ritual, etc.' This may be a recent innovation although some old informants told me that it had been done 'since the beginning'. For this second part, the officiant looks towards the east (as he does to the west for the first part), the side of the sun, which is the side of the living. The living literally turn their backs on the ancestors and 'look towards the sun' as if to say: 'Let's forget the past and look towards the future!' Wine and food is thrown towards the east.

From the above we can deduce an ambiguous attitude of the Yamba towards their ancestors. The ancestors are channels through which the special techniques of the rituals have been transmitted to the present holders but are not primarily responsible for their efficacy. Rituals are effective because they are performed legitimately and correctly and with the help of God.