

Chapter 7: Yamba Cults and Seasonal Dances

The ritual calendar of the Yamba contains a number of cult activities and seasonal dances which I have not met in other Grassfields' communities except among the Mfumte⁴⁴, northern neighbours of the Yamba. But as E.M. Chilver has pointed out (pers. comm.), although in these forms these cults and dances are peculiar to this area, 'one recognises many gambits which have been overlaid by palace-centred activities (in other Grassfields' chiefdoms) and which suggest an old layer of quarter or lineage-based activities.' The material in this chapter 'evokes an underlayer of local initiatic and power-collecting cults, possibly once more widespread until appropriated by the "palace-culture", with half-way houses [Kom *akum* etc.] — and will make us all look at the bits and pieces we have with new eyes.'

These cults and dances monopolise the village life for several days. Each cult performance which is forbidden to women and the uninitiated is followed by a general dance for everybody. Many Yamba who have left their native land to live or work in other parts of Cameroon or Nigeria return to their respective villages for these seasonal events. In this chapter I wish to explore the religious and social aspects of some of the more important Yamba cults and dances.

The Field-Setting

The cult performances and dances take place more or less independently in every quarter or hamlet of a village. In what follows I shall restrict myself again to the practices of Nkwi, one of the six hamlets of Gom village in Lower Yamba. I have witnessed some of the cults and I have been told about others. Since the cult activities cover the whole hamlet and centre on different localities and shrines it is necessary to give a summary of the spatial units or field-setting of Nkwi (Map 3 above).

Both Upper and Lower Nkwi have a *mambiq* (*mbiq* means 'open place' or 'yard'). The *mambiq*, a circular area surrounded by stones which serve as seats, is the place where the different Yamba cults (*rum*), like *so*, *garu* and *cimbi* start and end their activities. The *mambiq* is situated at the edge of the living space of the hamlet. Women are not allowed to go there.

44. V. Baeke (1984, 1985) calls them 'sociétés secrètes' or 'sociétés initiatiques'. For reasons given below I prefer to call them cults.

Another important shrine which features in all the cult activities except *ɲwan-tap*, the most important of them is the *mɛlak*. The *mɛlak* is situated in the yard of Yɛfak's compound next to the *ta fak* (*tap*⁴⁵ means 'hut', *fak* means 'work', especially 'to do farm work'). Yɛfak is second in importance after the chief. The name Yɛfak can be glossed as 'farm-master' (*yɛ* means 'to start'; *fak* 'farm work') but it is more correct to refer to him as priest, as I will show presently. There are three Yɛfak in Nkwi, one of them, now old and blind, is the senior one. He has handed over all his ritual duties to the second Yɛfak but still attends the cult performances to make the ritual invocations with the accompanying libations. The third Yɛfak is a young man who is being introduced into the ritual tasks of a Yɛfak. The *mɛlak*, which consists of a large stone surrounded by smaller stones arranged like a pavement, was described to me as the place where 'things are made cool'. Rites are performed there to make the hamlet 'cool'. Besides the big *mɛlak* in Yɛfak's compound there is a smaller one attached to the *mambiŋ*.

Formerly each side had a *nda rum* (*ndap* means 'house'; *rum* is the generic term for 'cult' or 'juju' in Pidgin English) where the *sacra* of the different cults are stored. The *nda rum* of Bu-Fəm (Upper Nkwi) had fallen into disrepair many years ago and was never rebuilt. All the *sacra* of Upper Nkwi have been taken to the *nda rum* of Lower Nkwi, except for the fibre suits of *so'* which the chief stores in his house. The *nda rum* of Ma-Kwak has been erected in the compound of Foa-Nyongu who is also its custodian. It is built in traditional style, i.e. an open hut without walls, the roof being supported by four pillars made of hardened mud mixed with palm nut chaff. Under the roof there is a loft in which the *sacra* are stored. The original thatched roof has been replaced by a zinc roof. In former times the *nda rum* was part of the *mambiŋ*. The reason for transferring it to Foa-Nyongu's compound was, I was told, that at the *mambiŋ* white ants would often invade the loft and destroy many of the *sacra*, especially the *so'* fibre suits. Under the new *nda rum* a fire would burn regularly, the rising smoke preventing white ants from entering the loft.

There are three more shrines in Upper Nkwi which play an important part in the cult activities. The first one is *cum so'* (sit down *so'*), a large boulder situated above the chief's compound. Above the chief's palace there was formerly a compound (*bu'lak*) called Bu-Yang. At the time of the Fulani wars in the last century the people of Bu-Yang fled to Ndu (Wiya) in the Wimbun

45. In Yamba speech initial consonants are often lost through elision, e.g. *ta fak* (*tap fak*), *nda rum* (*ndap rum*) etc.

area (or were captured?) and never returned. Today there are still a few houses there. Just beyond Bu-Yang there is a war trench (*siŋ dze*) which can still be identified as such today. About fifty yards further on, following the road to Mungong (where most of the people of Nchak, another quarter of Gom, have their farms), there is the *shie garu*. The *shie garu* consists of a tree surrounded by a scatter of small stones. *Shie* in *shie garu* has a different meaning from *shie so* where *shie* means 'grave' (of *so*). The *shie so* is the place where all broken or torn *rum sacra* are buried. It is found at the *mambiŋ* under a plantain or a banana stem, the fruit of which only Foa-Nyongu may eat. But *shie* in *shie garu* is an ideophone of the sound a mother makes to quieten a child — *shshshsh*! In other words, the *shie garu* is another shrine where the hamlet is made 'cool'. About fifteen yards further on there is the *mbuk suen* (stone, elephant), a large flat stone with several conical holes in it. The story is told that, in olden days, the ancestors of Nkwi 'entered' there and transformed into elephants. Two men, or a man and a woman, would stand several feet apart, one behind the other. A huge earthenware pot, formerly used for boiling palm nuts, was placed between them and securely tied to their bodies, forming the belly of the elephant. Then the two people and the pot would be covered with thick layers of dry grass and the whole ensemble covered again with the skin of an elephant and neatly stitched together. The 'elephant' would then go to Mfumte or up to Mbem. People spotting the 'elephant' would raise the alarm and hunters would come out, throwing their spears trying to kill it. The spears would enter the skin and the thick layer of grass and remain stuck there without harming the two people inside. When the 'elephant' felt that it had collected enough spears it would return to Nkwi and be welcomed with great rejoicing. The spears were then divided among the hunters of the hamlet. In those days spears were scarce and this was an ingenious way to get spears. Informants readily conceded that their ancestors could do this only because they had 'bellies', i.e. possessed witchcraft.

Finally, I still have to mention the *dzok bum* (shrine; tradition, country fashion) also called *kum bum* (no etymology for *kum* could be found) which also plays a part in the different cult activities. Each of the six *bu'lak* (descent groups) of Nkwi has a *dzok bum* in its main yard consisting of a large stone embedded in the ground.

An Overview of Yamba Cults and Seasonal Dances

The Yamba term which I translate as cults is *rum*, a generic term which, although only used in the singular form, covers all the different Yamba cults. The Pidgin English word 'juju', often used by English-speaking Yamba,

expresses the notion of *rum* better than ‘secret societies’ or ‘initiation societies’. Yamba cults and seasonal dances are different from societies and associations found elsewhere in the western Grassfields as defined by Geary (1979: 55, following Ruel 1969: 199). They are not ‘formally constituted groups of persons who follow common rules and regulations of membership and participate in common activities which are formally defined,’ nor do they meet at regular intervals. Since membership of the major cults is open to all male members of the hamlet and initiation fees are trifling, they do not constitute an avenue for gaining prestige.

Yamba cults can be divided into major cults which are open to all male members of a hamlet and those which are owned by one or more lineages, access to which is restricted to senior members of those lineages. All cults are invested with secrecy. Women and the uninitiated may not see the cult instruments nor their performances under pain of falling ill (*ta rum*).

2.1. Major Yamba Cults

There are four major cults (*rum*): *ɲwantap*, *so'*, *garu*, and *cimbi*, membership of which is virtually obligatory. It would ‘spoil’ the hamlet if a young man refused to enter.

1. *ɲwantap* is the most important and most powerful of all the Yamba cults. It does not appear in public. No dances or songs are associated with it and it does not ‘cry deaths’. The *ɲwantap* sacra consist of two earthenware pots (in Upper Yamba two calabashes), one being the male *ɲwantap* - *ɲwantap ɲgoŋ* -, the other the female *ɲwantap* - *ɲwantap malak*. *ɲwantap ɲgoŋ* is periodically brought out to ‘lock’ the roads (*lok ntaamse*) or an individual may take it to his palm bush to seal it off against malevolent outside influences. *ɲwantap* is the major cult which causes and cures particular afflictions. The main sickness associated with *ɲwantap* is swollen belly (ascites). If divination reveals that the person has been afflicted by *ɲwantap malak* it means certain death. There is no remedy against being caught by the female *ɲwantap*. A person ‘caught’ by *ɲwantap ɲgoŋ* can be ‘fixed’ if he or she confesses. Of the major Yamba cults it is only *ɲwantap* which ‘catches’ people. *So'* is said to ‘see’ perpetrators of offences but it does not ‘catch’ them.

2. *So'* is the only masquerade of the Yamba. The semantic range of *so'* is as follows:

So' tap (or *so' cak*) is the annual ‘moving out’ of *so'* consisting of a number of rites, an initiation ceremony, the *so'* masquerade, and a pain endurance test by caning. *So' tap* is accompanied by *kayam*, that is young men using voice disguisers who go to the houses, in which women have locked themselves up, to beg for food.

So' ghaŋ or hunting *so'*. When a red duiker (*tsə*) or antelope (*ŋgap*) has been killed in the communal hunt the hunters sound the *so'* cry and sing songs associated with *so'*.

So' kpɯ or funeral *so'*. Early in the morning after the wake the men perform a running dance (*samndə*) in the direction of the deceased's palm bush accompanied by a *so'* masquerader. Having run some distance they stop and one man calls out the deceased's name three times. Receiving no answer they return. Back at the death compound the young men square up for a wrestling match (*ɬ so'*) (for more details see Chapter Nine).

3. *So' garu*. During one of the ceremonies of the *garu* cult the *so'* masqueraders appear to frighten and manhandle young boys.

4. *Cimbi* has two main functions. First of all it 'cries deaths'. The calabash horn band of four players performs during the wake. During the month of November the annual *cimbi* dance takes place accompanied by a number of rituals which are intended to 'mend' the land.

2.2. Yamba Cults Owned by Particular Lineages

I can only list the names of some of these cults and mention a few of their characteristics. These cults cannot be fully described. Their cult *sacra* and the activities are among the most effectively guarded Yamba secrets. Only few things are generally known to non-members.

- *toy*. According to several of my informants the cult object of *toy* consists of a small earthenware pot. A person afflicted by *toy* will suffer from inflated testicles.
- *tɛ'rum*. The cult *sacra* are said to be four wooden anthropomorphic figurines, holding their arms behind their backs. The affliction caused by *tɛ'rum* is stated in rather vague term as 'general sickness of the body'.
- *Rum buin koa'*. Its paraphernalia are also a number of wooden figurines. When they are brought out the custodian of the cult puts them on the ground facing away from the cult members (*buin koa'* — 'to show one's back').

These cults are not performed publicly. They are only brought out at the death of a cult member. When people hear the distinct sound of the cult approaching, they will all run for cover. The cult members will circle the bamboo frame (*ntəŋ*) to which the corpse has been tied several times before returning to the *mambij*.

2.3. Seasonal Dances

The performances of the three major Yamba cults, *so'*, *garu* and *cimbi*, are followed by women's dances. But these dances are not dance associations in the sense that women would have to pay entrance fees or which are a means

by which they gain prestige. There are no leaders. Everybody, men, women and children, join the dance. The Yamba have no female cults. Other seasonal dances which are not women's dances are *cam*, *tajo'*, and *bubak*.

The women's dances are:

- *Ndeṅndeṅ* (*mandeṅ*, *mandik*). The musical instruments consist of about fifteen three to four feet long and three inches wide pieces of wood, pointed at both ends, which are held in the left hand and beaten with a short stick. The sound produced is like that of xylophone. Two double-membrane drums (*ncum barə*) and rattlesacks of basketry provide additional rhythm. The drum players are men. The women, and also men, dance in a circle around them striking the *mandeṅ* instruments. Yamba informants prepared to offer an etymology say that the name *ndeṅndeṅ* is an ideophone of the sound produced by striking the pieces of wood — *ndeng-ndeng-ndeng*. A woman who wants to have her own instrument will ask her husband to make one for her. She will then keep it in her own house. The instruments are not stored together in a special place. The women of Mbem are famous for their dancing and playing *mandeṅ*. Formerly, *ndeṅndeṅ* was not known in Lower Yamba. It was introduced from Mbem. The *ndeṅndeṅ* dance follows *so' tap*. The dance itself is called *ṅka' lak* (dance; settlement) and lasts for four days. *Ndeṅndeṅ* is also danced at the wake (name *kpu*) of a woman who has delivered only one or no male children. If a woman has had two or more sons *cimbi* is danced.
- *Matitik*. The main feature of the *matitik* dance are twelve to fifteen feet long bamboo poles (*mbaṅ matitik*) which every woman holds upright in her hands and rhythmically knocks on the ground while dancing. The top of the poles may be decorated with raffia fibre strands or a woman's head tie. If a woman wants her next child to be a male child she will cut away a slice from the top of the pole. Informants volunteered that this was indicative of a circumcised penis. I was told that the name *matitik* was derived from the distinct sound produced by the knocking of the bamboo poles on the ground — *tik-tik-tik*. Two *ncum barə* provide the rhythm. The *matitik* dance joins with the male *cam* and is then called *ṅka' ṅgwu* ('dance'; 'rizga or native carrots' — *Coleus dazo*).
- *ṅka' baba* ('dance, women'). This dance which follows the *garu* and *cimbi* cult performances is also called women's *garu*. *ṅka' baba* has no special instruments, only drums (*ncum barə*) and rattlesacks of basketry (*mbak*) are used.

Other important dances known to Yamba are *cam*, *tajo'* and *bubak*.

- *Cam*⁴⁶ is a dance mainly for boys and young men, but older men take part too. It comes closest to a dance association. Although it has some esoteric elements it is not *rum*. *Cam* is performed publicly and women are allowed to see the dance and even join in it. Boys enter *cam* at an early age. The entrance fee is one cock, a jug of wine, and a small dish of meat with a basket of fufu. The members paint patterns in white chalk (*boa cam*) on their bodies. Some members are believed to have ‘bellies’ or ‘eyes’, i.e. to possess witchcraft. They fly to Mambila country to the east in order to steal the fertility of farms and livestock which they distribute on their return to all the compounds of the hamlet. The *cam* dance takes place around the beginning of January (see also Chapter Eight).
- *Tajo*’ is first and foremost a marriage dance. It occurs at the ‘carrying off’ and the ‘moving out’ of the bride (see Chapter Two) but it is also danced after the annual *cimbi* and *garu* cult performance.
- *Bubak*. In Mbem, Upper Yamba, the bubak dance takes place two weeks before *cam* and the *ŋka’ŋgwu* dance, whilst in Nkwi it marks the end of the annual cycle of cult performances and dances. It is the dance which closes *ŋka’ŋgwu*. *Bubak* involves the erection of a long bamboo pole by Yefak to the top of which a bird effigy called *bubak* made of raffia pith has been tied. In the evening people gather for a night dance (*namə ŋka’*) which is continued on the following afternoon.

In what follows I shall give a detailed, descriptive account of the performances of three of the major Yamba cults, *so’ tap*, *garu* and *cimbi*, and the general dances that follow.

3. *So’ tap*

The ritual calendar of Yamba cults opens in May/June with the annual ‘moving out’ of *so’ tap*, also called *so’ cak* (*tap* and *cak* refer to the hut in which the fibre suits are kept, more commonly known as *nda rum* or house of *rum*). *So’* is the only masquerade known to the Yamba.⁴⁷ The cult activities extend over four days starting on *ntezuru*⁴⁸ and ending on *ntebom* of the eight day Yamba week. *So’ tap* follows a certain ‘line’. The first village to start the *so’* masquerade is Mbem. The following week Nwa ‘moves out’ *so’*, the week after that Mfe. From Mfe *so’* goes down to Kwak and Bom before crossing over to Rom. Finally, Gom and Nkot take over. These two villages dance *so’*

46. The hanging up of *bubak* and the *cam* and *ŋka’ŋgwu* dance as practised in Mbem have been described by Moss (n.d.: 128-136).

in the same week. Formerly, the *so'* masquerade was a biennial event, but nowadays it occurs annually. When *so'* did not come out only the ritual component *tin və so'* (spread ashes *so'*) was performed. I was unable to elicit any information about the origin of *so' tap*. All my informants claimed that it was a 'Yamba thing' right from 'the beginning'.

3.1. The Blowing of *ηκπρ so'*

In the evening before *so'* is 'moved out' (*to so' tap*) all people gather at Foa-Nyongu's compound (Lower Nkwi) for an all-night dance. The dance which occurs is the women's dance *ndeηndeη*. On *ntezuru*, before dawn, a man specially appointed by Yefak, goes to the *mambiη* and blows the *ηκπρ so'* (*fəp ηκπρ so'*), a type of notched flute. Holding a bundle of *yo* and *mbəmbuəm* leaves in his hand, he emerges from the *mambiη* and goes to the *məlak* where he places one of each of the leaves. As he does this he gives a loud shout — woou-oi! He sounds the *so' cry* (*so' de waa*) and blows the *ηκπρ so'*. On hearing the *so' cry* the dancers rush into the nearby houses and lock the doors. Neither men nor women must see the man as he passes through the hamlet placing the special leaves (*ma' yo so'*) at every *dzok bum* of the six 'compounds' (*bu'lak*). Informants told me that *ma' yo so'* is done to make the hamlet 'cool'. The two leaves, *yo* and *mbəmbuəm*, respectively female and male, are placed together.⁴⁹ As one informant, Pa Kobuin, told me, 'Man and woman are joined together; it is a thing to fix the country.'

If somebody inadvertently sees the flute player he has to go and see him later on with some food and wine (*fa cop* — 'pay the mistake'). He shares the

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47. In the Mandak quarter of Bom I have seen another mask called *ma-ηko'* which appears with the *so'* masquerade. *Ma-ηko'* has a wooden headpiece representing a buffalo head. There were formerly two masks, one male (red) and one female (black). The female headpiece was stolen many years ago. The body of the masker is concealed by two layers of raffia fibres, one attached to the headpiece and the other tied around his waist. Likewise Ngwen and Nya-Jak, two 'compounds' (*bu'lak*) of Sang quarter in Gom, reportedly had such masks. They too were stolen, or, more likely, sold to art dealers. According to several of my informants *ma-ηko'* is not original to Yamba. Most probably it has been borrowed from Mfumte where such masks are in use.
48. The days of the Yamba octave (week) in the Gom dialect of Lower Yamba are as follows: *ntəlak* ('Country Sunday'), *nteki*, *ntəbom*, *ntəviη*, *ntəfuen*, *ntəsəm*, *ndəs*, and *ntezuru*.
49. The leaves of the elephant grass (*Pennisetum purpureum*) are referred to as *yo*. The *mbəmbuəm* leaf is male (it 'covers' things) while the *yo* leaf is female.

food and wine with the two Yefak. If the man does not do so all his things will spoil.

An eerie silence descends on the hamlet when the *ηκυρ so'* blower leaves the *melak*, goes down to Sango's compound, the last compound at the lower end of Ma-Kwak, crossing over to Foa-Nyongu's compound and hence up through the hamlet to the *shie garu*. As soon as the *ηκυρ so'* blower is out of sight, the dancers emerge and continue their dance, only to disappear again when they hear the *so'* cry and the sound of the *ηκυρ so'* approaching as the man comes down from the *shie garu*. This happens three times. The third time the flute player goes straight to the *mambiq*.

Formerly, in the year when *so'* was not moved out — all the Yamba villages followed Mbem — the man who was supposed to blow the *ηκυρ so'* did not blow it. He only gave the warning shout and the *so'* cry. When he placed the *yo* and *mbəmbuəm* leaves at the *melak* and the different *dzok bum* he also sprinkled ashes over them (*tin və so'*). This was the sign that the *so'* masquerade would not appear that year.

In the morning all people go to their bush kitchens to 'cook *mbanga*' (produce palm oil). In order to produce palm oil the palm nuts are boiled in huge drums containing over 200 litres. The boiled nuts are then poured into a large wooden mortar resembling a dugout and pounded by men with wooden pestles to separate the mesocarp from the kernels. The rhythmic pounding is accompanied by singing. The women's task is to carry water for the cooking and washing of the nuts. Having finished their work the women are given handfuls of pounded mesocarp (*le'*) which they will eat in their houses. During the duration of the *so' tap* cult performances and dance women and the uninitiated have to stay indoors. After the women have gone the men start to sing the *so'* songs. They sing as they *tap* their palm trees and when they return from the palm bush in the evening. After nightfall they gather at the *mambiq* of Lower Nkwi for an all-night dance (*namə ηka' so'*). The *so'* maskers do not appear yet.

3.2. *So' de ca' mbiq*

On *ntelak*, before daybreak, the chief and Foa-Nyongu take the boxes containing the *so'* fibre suits to their respective *mambiq* where they are given to young men to put on. Men whose wives are pregnant may not wear the fibre suit. If they did the child would be born with marks on his skin resembling a net and die.

The fibre suit is not soaked in water and rubbed to make it supple, a practice reported by David Zeitlyn among the Mambila (1994: 107). The suit of the *so'* masker must not come into contact with water. It is said that, if so, the person wearing the suit would suffer from severe itching. In Mfe, Upper Yamba, I was told that if rain touched the *so'* suit the man wearing it would contract leprosy. In 1996 there were only three maskers in Nkwi. The *so'* suits are very expensive, cost up to 30.000 CFA, and owing to rough handling disintegrate very soon. The suits are made of fibres of the wild banana plant, in Pidgin English called bush banana (*gom ngon*).⁵⁰ The different parts of the suit are made separately and then sewn together to make one piece. The whole body of the masker is covered, only the feet show. The dress has a slit in front across the chest through which the wearer slips in. The opening is then stitched together with a rope. There is no carved headpiece and the head does not clearly show. The dress goes from the shoulders in a straight line up to the top of the head without indicating a neck. The fibre suit is marked all over with squares, lines, and dots in black. Two big circles in front near the top stand out prominently and represent the 'eyes' of *so'*. *So'* is said to 'see' evil-doers (*so' ye wu*). An illustration of *so'* maskers and the fibre suit can be found in Gebauer (1979: 5, 358).

Having donned the *so'* suits the maskers and all the men of Lower Nkwi leave the *mambij* and run up through the hamlet to the *shie garu* and back singing *so'* songs and sounding the *so'* cry. They run up a second time. When they have passed the chief's place on their way down the men of Upper Nkwi with their maskers follow them at a distance. As Lower Nkwi comes up a third time, they meet half way, Upper Nkwi going down to Foa-Nyongu's place, Lower Yamba running up to the *shie garu*. On their return they meet again. From there each group goes straight to their respective *mambij*. This is called *so' de ca' mbij* (*so'* salutes the hamlet). Any suggestion that the running up and down through the hamlet by the *so'* masquerade was meant to unite or enhance the unity of the hamlet was denied by my informants. All this happens before sunrise. At the *mambij* the maskers remove the fibre suits and put them back in the boxes. After this the men go to their palm bushes to *tap* wine singing *so'* songs and sounding the *so'* cry.

50. According to Gebauer (1964: 358) the *so'* fibre costume is made out of dyed raffia fibres. This is incorrect. All my informants were unanimous in stating that the suits were woven with fibres from the bush banana (*ensete* sp.). I was able to verify this personally.

3.3. Initiation into *so'*

When the men return from the morning wine tapping the boys ready to be initiated into *so'* are brought by their fathers to the *nda rum* at Foa-Nyongu's compound or to the chief's palace where the initiation ceremonies take place simultaneously for the two 'sides' of Nkwi. Nowadays boys are initiated when they are at a very young age, between eight and twelve years. During the initiation ceremony they see the *so'* mask when it suddenly appears frightening and maltreating them but they may not participate in the dances and activities that follow. Only when they are big enough to join the communal hunt are they told the secrets of the *so'* mask. The initiation fee (*mi rum*) for each boy is two fowls, one jug of wine, and a basket of fufu.

The father has to take his first son to the son's *tɛ'tsə* (mother's father/brother) to be initiated by him into *so'*. The father has to provide two fowls, one jug of wine, a dish of meat (*fua'*), one basket of fufu, and 5.000 CFA (formerly five marriage shovels). He has also to give one spear. These payments are called *koŋ rum* (spear juju). But the father has still to initiate his first son into the *so'* cult in his own place, again paying two fowls, one jug of wine, but no *fua'* and no money. The fee given to his *tɛ'tsə* is part of the marriage payments. If he does not pay, the son may fall ill. The juju of his *tɛ'tsə* will 'catch' him. The father will be paid back when his daughter's first son is brought to him to be initiated into *so'*.

The initiation into the *so'* cult is called *sea ŋgo so'* (*ŋgop* means 'skin', here the fibre suit; *sea* can be translated as 'brushing' of a fowl over the face of the initiand). For the initiation ceremony only part of the fibre suit, the part which covers the hand and the arm up to the elbow like a glove (*ma-ŋgo so'*, *ma* means 'mother', therefore mother of *so'*), is used. The boys are taken to the *mambiq* by the officiant (Foa-Nyongu). He takes along one of the fowls and a small calabash of wine. He places the *ma-ŋgo so'* on the ground and covers it with *mbambuəm* leaves. The boys do not know what it is. Now the officiant, holding the fowl by its legs, brushes it over each candidate's face and then over the *ma-ŋgo so'* three times. This is done so that the boys' eyes may not 'turn' when they see the juju, preventing them from getting dizzy. Next he tears the beak of the fowl and lets some blood drop on the *ma-ŋgo so'*. He also applies some blood on the sternum of each initiand with his thumb. Finally he blows palm wine on the initiand's chest. The blood touched to the *ma-ŋgo so'* and the boy's chest establishes a link or seals a bond between the two. The initiand becomes a member of the *so'* cult.

After this they all go back to Foa-Nyongu's compound where all the fowls brought by the initiands are killed and cooked. This is the time when *kayam*, the companion of *so'*, makes his appearance. One man is chosen to go to the *mambiŋ* and talking through a voice disguiser he calls Foa-Nyongu, the head of the *nda rum* of Lower Nkwi, three times telling him that he has come. Foa-Nyongu answers and bids him welcome. Then *kayam* also calls the chief three times but does not wait for an answer because the palace is too far away for the chief to hear him. After that the man comes and joins the initiation proceedings.

Kayam is what is called an acoustical mask. Its only distinctive instrument is a voice disguiser. *Kayam* is *rum* and women and the uninitiated may not see it. Any man who knows how to sing and talk through the voice disguiser may use it. *Kayam* accompanies *so'* wherever it goes. During night dances *kayam*, mainly young men, go to the houses in which women (their girl friends?) have locked themselves up to beg for food. In some ways they are like jesters. There is no separate initiation into *kayam*. Boys who have 'seen' *so'* may also 'see' *kayam*.

When the food is cooked, Foa-Nyongu takes a lump of fufu in his hand and places the head and gizzard of the fowl which had been used to brush the faces of the initiands on it. Then he takes the boys to the *mambiŋ* and gathers them around him. After having knocked the back of his hand holding the food on the *ma-ŋgo so'* he makes three small balls of fufu, touches them to the meat and places one ball on his small finger, one on his middle finger and one on his thumb. The first initiand comes and blowing on it bites off a little piece from each ball spitting the first bite to his left, the second to his right and the third in front of him. This is called *bəŋse be' mbe tu rum* ('lick fufu on head juju'). When all the initiands have been treated thus, Foa-Nyongu gives them the head of the fowl and the rest of the fufu to eat, he himself taking the gizzard.

Now they return again to the *nda rum* where the cooked fowls and the fufu are divided among all present including the initiands. Having been treated they may now, and in future, join in eating food given to *so'*. While the eating and wine drinking goes on, two or three young men quietly disappear in the direction of the *mambiŋ* to don the fibre suits and hide themselves nearby. When everybody has eaten Foa-Nyongu takes the initiands back to the *mambiŋ*. He sits down at the *shie so'* (grave of *so'*) and giving the boys switches of a certain shrub (*ŋghu dzoŋ*) he tells them to beat him on his back. As the boys lash out at him, accompanied by shouts of hooo-hooo-ho!, the *so'* maskers appear. Somebody warns the boys shouting, 'Look out! Something is

coming behind you!’ Before they are aware what is happening it is too late. As the maskers fall on them, manhandling and beating them, the boys scream in terror and try to run away. Their fathers come to their rescue and carry them to safety. When the maskers have disappeared the boys are brought back.

Foa-Nyongu still sitting at the shie *so*’ takes a piece of *ne rum*⁵¹ from his bag, a white, chalky type of mushroom which grows on rotting trees, chews it into pulp and spits it on a *mbambuəm* leaf. He calls one of the initiands who crouches down before him. He places a *mbambuəm* leaf over the boy’s face locking his eyes. Then he puts his thumb into the *ne rum* pulp and applies it on the boy’s chest. Next he pours some palm wine on the ground, mixes it into mud, and with his thumb marks the boy’s chest. Then still holding the leaf in place, he puts his head against the initiand’s head, calls his name and says, ‘*Rum ko nda?*’ (the juju will catch whom?), to which the boy replies, ‘*Rum ko wu*’ (the juju will catch you). He repeats this three times. After each question the officiant blows the *ndo tsə* (horn, red duiker) next to both the boy’s ears. All the initiands are treated the same. This ritual sequence is called *be moa nca rum* (treat child ground juju). *Nca rum* is the ground of the shie *so*’, the grave of *so*’.

It was explained to me that as the boys have seen the *so*’ masks their ‘eyes’ and ‘hearts’ have been affected. If an uninitiated sees the *so*’ masks his eyes are believed to ‘turn’. It is as if some ‘darkness’ has come over his eyes, as when somebody faints. His heart is ‘open’, meaning exposed or vulnerable, and ‘dry’. When we experience a great fright or shock we feel dryness in our mouth. Yamba say, rather, that one’s heart becomes dry. In order to counteract these effects the initiands are treated with the *mbambuəm* leaf and the *ne rum* and *nca rum*. The *mbambuəm* leaf is meant to ‘cover’ the darkness which fell on the boy’s eyes or to wipe out the memory of the *so*’ masks so that he will not dream about them (have nightmares) and it won’t haunt him. By blowing the *ndo tsə* next to the boy’s ears Foa-Nyongu ‘calls back’, as it were, or reverses the experience of the boy of having seen the *rum* so that it should leave the boy and ‘catch’ the custodian instead. *Nca rum* is a paradigm of coolness and moisture. The hearts of the boys are made ‘cool’. *Ne rum* ‘joins’ their hearts again, pulls them together (as when we say ‘pull yourself together’).

51. V. Baeke reports that the Wuli (Lus, of Mfumte) use a similar substance, also called *nè*, which she identifies as the ‘*mycelium of *Lentinus tuber-regium**’ (Baeke 1985: 190).

Be moa nca rum ends the initiation into *so'*. The boys are not yet allowed to participate in the *so'* activities and dance which still follow. They have 'seen' *so'* but have not been told anything about its secrets. It is only when they have grown up and participated in the communal hunt that they are told.

For the rest of the day one can see groups of men and youths singing and dancing in the hamlet or going to the palm bush to drink wine. Everybody, including the maskers, hold switches (*ɲkwa'*) in their hands. English-speaking Yamba call them canes. Two men would challenge each other and square up for a pain endurance test. There were rules and other men would stand nearby to intervene if matters were to get out of hand. The two contestants would stand facing each other. They were not allowed to move their feet and give only one stroke at a time. The one receiving the stroke would turn his upper body sideways to receive the blow on his back. Then he would strike back. This goes on till one of them surrenders and runs away. Already after the first few strokes blood would flow. Sometimes this was an occasion to settle old scores.

There is one injunction which is taken seriously by all: one must not strike a masker. If a masker struck you and you have a suspicion that he did it out of malice you may not strike him. If you did he would contract leprosy. In such a case you would challenge him to undress there and then before you start to cane each other.

In many places this practice has been stopped to the disappointment and disapproval of older men, but in Nkwi it was still going on in 1996. Old people complain that the youth of today are weak and soft because they are unwilling to undergo this test of manhood.

The time of the *so'* masquerade is also the time when mothers could get their own back on disobedient sons. She would tell her husband to arrange for the *so'* maskers to come to her house. Then the recalcitrant boy would be pushed out of the door and be manhandled and beaten by the maskers.

3.4. The Village Dance

The following day, *nteki*, is Gom market day. The market is situated in the Sang quarter of Gom, on the right bank of the Massim river. All the maskers of the six quarters of Gom, and some from Nkot, accompanied by men and boys assemble at the market square where they spend most of the day dancing, singing, and drinking. The square is awash with maskers and dancing men and the noise is quite deafening. That this was done to enhance the vil-

lage unity was denied by my informants, but this element is undeniably present. For the people it is an occasion for socializing, meeting with friends, exchanging news, and gossip.

3.5. *ηgiη so'*, *kopte bum* and *ndaη so'*

The fourth and final day (*ntebom*) of the *so'* masquerade starts again with a running dance early in the morning called *ηgiη so'* (I was unable to find a gloss for *ηgiη*). The dancers including the maskers emerge from the *mambij* of Lower Nkwi and run up through the hamlet to the *shie garu* and a second time to the *cum so'*, circling the *dzok bum* of every *bu'lak* and the *shie garu*, before returning to the *mambij*.

After this the men go to the palm bush for the morning tapping. By mid-morning the Yefak of Nchak, accompanied by a masker and a number of dancers come to Nkwi. They follow the road to Mungong which passes Nkwi to the west. Climbing the hill till they are level with the *shie garu* they cross over to Bu-Yang and come down to the chief's compound where they dance for a while. Then they run down to the *melak* of Lower Nkwi. Yefak has given the masker two leaves each of the following three plants: elephant grass (*yo*), *mbəmbuəm*, and *gambi* (maize). The masker puts one of each leaves down at the *melak* and takes up one specimen of the same leaves which the Yefak of Nkwi has placed there. After this they return to Nchak via the small market of Nkwi. When they arrive at the *melak* of Foa-Make of Nchak the masker puts the leaves taken from Nkwi there. The Nkwi masquerade led by Yefak follow taking the normal road. They proceed straight to the *melak* and the masker exchanges the leaves put there by Nchak, taking them back to Nkwi.

This exchange of visits and plants (*kopte bum*) has, I was told, historical reasons. The people of Nchak are latecomers to Gom. In precolonial times they fled from Ntem in the Mbo' plain to the south and after several abortive attempts to settle they were given a place right in the centre of Gom. In recognition of this, the Yefak of Nchak, being the junior, comes to 'salute' or pay his respects to the senior Yefak of Nkwi. As a sign of good neighbourliness they exchange the leaves which are meant to 'cool' their hamlets and to protect their farms, especially the maize, which having produced tassels is in great danger of being damaged by tropical storms rampant at around this time of the year.

Back in Nkwi the dance continues at Foa-Nyongu's compound till about 3:00 p.m. when a man, specially appointed, knocks the double bell (*ηkəη*). This is the sign for all to go to the *melak*. *So'* is about to enter. For the last

time the *so'* masquerade will pass up and down the hamlet three times. This final dance is called *ndaŋ so'*. Six young men, one from each *bu'lak*, are chosen to lead the running dance behind the man knocking the bell. Wearing their fibre suits and holding canes in each hand they run wildly lashing out at bystanders and crops. *So'* is said to 'craze' (*so' ŋea-ŋea*) because it is about to enter. The man with the double bell at the head would run some distance, then stop and go backwards a few steps pushing the whole line of dancers backwards. This running, stopping, and going backwards continues till they reach the *shie garu*. On their way down they run without halting. The second time they only reach Bu-Yang where the masker of the Fulak lineage removes the part of the fibre suit which covers his head. They run down to the *melak* and up again a third time in the same fashion, this time ending at the *cum so'* just above the chief's yard. The masker of Fulak now removes the fibre suit down to his waist. After having danced around the *cum so'* several times the masquerade moves down a last time through the hamlet. They now move slowly, taking care not to step on each other's feet.

There are several points of interest in this episode of *ndaŋ so'*. The running, stopping, and retreating is said to be instrumental in encouraging a type of edible caterpillars (*ŋkuŋ*) to stay in the vicinity of the hamlet. If the dancers were to run straight up without stopping and retreating, the caterpillars, which eat the leaves of the ironwood tree around the second half of July, would disappear without trace. The reason why six young men, one from each *bu'lak*, run at the head of the masquerade is, I was told, so that all the lineages may share equally in the fertility of the palm bush. If only one 'kitchen' (*bu'lak*) were to go ahead all the fertility would go to that 'kitchen'. The injunction not to touch each other's feet has a similar reason. If somebody touched another man's foot he has given all the palm nuts of his palm bush to that man. In other words, his own palm trees would not produce any fruit but the other man's would bear in a spectacular way. Finally, the gradual stepping back of the point of return, first *shie garu*, second *Bu-Yang*, and third *cum so'*, is also symbolically motivated. It is said to prevent the food supply of the hamlet from finishing prematurely. If the masquerade were to reach *shie garu*, the furthest point, every time the food supply would be exhausted quickly. It would go 'one time'.

At the entrance of the *mambiŋ* the man who strikes the double bell stops and retreats again a few steps pushing the line of dancers back. He does this three times before finally entering. The maskers undress and Yefak folds the fibre suits. He also collects the canes, rattlesacks, and *ŋkup so'* from all the dancers and puts them aside in a heap. Then he takes one fibre suit in his

hands and turning towards the west he makes a ritual invocation saying, ‘Evil winds, let them pass above. If you come out in *songon* (witch-breeze) to spoil the crops in the farms who will see you?’ All present answer, ‘*So’ ye wu’*. (So’ will see you). ‘If you come with bad things and enter the ground in order to damage the crops in the ground who will carry you?’ All answer, ‘*So’ bək wu!’* (So’ will carry you). Yefak shakes the fibre suit three times towards the west. He also takes a handful of ashes from the fireplace and blows it in the same direction. Then he turns to the east and says, ‘If you bring good things to the hamlet how will you be?’ All answer, ‘*Num nə boŋ to wu!’* (Good sun shines on you). Yefak concludes the invocation by saying, ‘May crops grow well, may palm trees produce oil and wine in plenty, may fowls and goats multiply. May everything grow well.’ He shakes the fibre suit three times towards the east.

The ritual invocation is directed mainly against people who come out in *songon* (witch-breeze: see Chapter Eight). June is the month of severe tropical storms which cause a lot of damage in the farms and the hamlet. It is believed that *songon* witches are responsible for this. Yefak warns these witches that *so’* will see them and that *ŋwantap* will catch them. They will die and *so’* will carry them to the grave.

Next, Yefak hands out the canes, rattlesacks, and flutes to the respective owners. The fibre suits are placed in the boxes. The men leave the *mambin* in two groups: those of Ma-Kwak go across to the *nda rum* of Foa-Nyongu while those of Bu-Fəm go up to the chief’s place. As they go, carrying the boxes with the fibre suits, they sound the warning song *lo-lo-lo-a-lo*. Thus ends the annual *so’* masquerade.

3.6. *Ja dzə so’* and *ŋka’ lak*

The following day, *nteviŋ*, the women bring out the *mandeŋ* instruments and start their own dance called *dzə so’*. This dance, in which all people join, is performed in order to ‘remove the footprints of *so’* (*ja dzə so’*)’ and those of *kayam* (*ja kayam*). The dance lasts for one day. No rites take place.

The general dance, *ŋka’ lak*, which starts on *ntezuru* the following week, is an innovation in Lower Yamba. It was introduced from Mbem. Formerly *dzə so’* marked the end of *so’ tap*. For the *ŋka’ lak* the women bring out again the *mandeŋ* instruments, but it is a dance for all. Drums (*ncum barə*), rattlesacks (*mbak*), and the mandeh accompany the singing and dancing. The dance, which takes place mainly at night lasts for four days, but being the rainy season, is often disrupted by rain.

3.7. Some Further Comments on *So' tap*

Old Yamba traditionalists hold that *so'* is god (*nwi*). *So'* is effective and has power to 'fix things' (*tsəpte bum*) because it is god. Traditionally, Yamba believed that all *rum* are god(s). When I asked some elderly informants whether the different *rum* were different gods they told me that they are all the same god. How far this belief in one god has been influenced by Christianity or Islam is hard to tell. But I am inclined to believe that the different *rum* (*ɲwantap*, *so'*, *garu*, *cimbi*, etc.) are not held to be different divinities but are manifestations of the same god. Against this background one can now understand why nobody, even the men initiated into *so'*, is allowed to see the *ɲkup so'* blower when he goes through the hamlet placing *yo* and *mbəmbuəm* leaves at the different shrines, blowing the *ɲkup so'* and sounding the *so'* cry. The appearance of the divinity in this opening episode when *so'* enters the hamlet for the first time makes everybody run for safety. A similar belief is found in Yamba spider divination as I have shown elsewhere (see Chapter Four). There is a serious injunction forbidding the diviner to watch the spider as it comes out of its hole and disturbs the leaf-cards moving them around. It is believed that at that moment the spider is god. The diviner would die if he were to observe the spider in action.

David Zeitlyn (1994), in an interesting study on the Mambila, has brought out the close connection between the *sua* masquerade and *sua*-oaths. The Yamba do not accord *so'* the importance which the Mambila give to *sua*. My informants disclaim any connection between the *so'* masquerade and oaths. True, the ritual killing of cannibal witches (*gwε so'*, more commonly called *gwε ran*, cut 'medicine', leaves) is known among the Yamba. But there seems to be no conceptual unity between *so'* as a masquerade and *gwε so'* which is *ncəp* (medicine). *Gwε so'* is more likely an innovation. Formerly, if somebody was accused of being a cannibal witch he/she had to undergo the poison ordeal (*ɲgu*). When *ɲgu* was outlawed by the colonial government many Yamba substituted *gwε so'* for it. More importantly, oaths (in the sense used by Zeitlyn) are in Yamba taken under the auspices of *ɲwantap*, not *so'*. Such oaths following the resolution of a case judged at the *mambin* or the confession of a witch caught by *ɲwantap* can take four different forms by repeatedly knocking a ritual instrument on the ground while the leader of *ɲwantap* makes a ritual invocation. The instruments used can be a stone (*dzəp lis*), a double bell (*rukse ɲkəŋ*), a medicine bag (*rukse baam ncəp*), or a fly whisk (*dzəp soan*). No fowl is killed at the oath-taking, but the beak of a fowl is torn and blood marked on the offender's chest during the ritual component called *təm nzəp* (sprinkle cool water) in order to *fiise ɲwantap* (to placate *ɲwantap*).

So' does not both cause and cure afflictions. *So'* 'sees' you, but it is *ɲwantap* which catches you (*ɲwantap ko wu*) and kills you before *so'* 'carries' you (*so' bək wu*) to the grave. In a sense, then, all Yamba *rum* are under the umbrella of *ɲwantap*. *So'*, like other *rum*, afflicts women and the uninitiated (*ta rum*) if they see some elements of cult practice, its masks or instruments and they will fall ill. They have to report to the custodian of the *nda rum* who will 'fix' them; otherwise they will die. A boy, whose father is tardy in initiating him into *so'*, will be afflicted when he passes a shrine at which *so'* has placed leaves. One informant, who is a Christian, drew a parallel with the story in the Gospel where Jesus says, 'Let the children come to me'. In a similar way, he said, *so'* is saying, 'Why do they not bring this boy to me?' and afflicts him in order to force the father to 'show' him *so'*.

4. *Garu*

The second cult performance in the ritual calendar of the Yamba is the 'moving out' of *garu* (*to garu*) which takes place in August after the maize harvest. It does not appear on any other occasion and does not 'cry deaths'. *Garu* is one of the few Yamba cult names with an etymology. *Ga* means 'basket', a type of wicker basket (in Pidgin English *kenja*) used to carry fowls, calabashes of oil or palm wine, etc., to the market. In this context it is the basket in which the *garu* instruments are kept. *Ru* according to some of my informants is *rum* (cult) with an elided 'm'.

The *garu* instruments are voice disguisers. They consist of calabash necks, about 20 cm long, the open ends covered with bat wings (*bap lyəm*) or spiderweb (*mba*) — nowadays a thin plastic wrapping or nylon tissue is used — with a mouth hole in the middle. The sound produced by these instruments is like that made by blowing through a comb covered with tissue paper.

Garu is *rum* and thus invested with secrecy. Women and uninitiated boys must not see the instruments nor the cult performances under pain of falling ill (*ta rum*). But as with *so'*, *garu* does not belong to the category of *rum* which are associated with a disease or an affliction of which they are both cause and cure. *Garu* does not 'catch' a person.

4.1. The Cult Performance and Initiation into *garu*

Towards evening of the day of the Yamba week called *ntɛfuen*, Foa-Nyongu takes down the basket containing the *garu* instruments from the loft of the *nda rum* and secretly brings them to the *mambiŋ*. Yɛfak and some other men who have already entered the stage of the *cimbi* cult called *kom tu cimbi* (see

later) take the instruments out of the basket and start to repair them, fitting them with new nylon tissues. This is called *kom tu garu* (clean or shave head of *garu*).

Later in the evening of the same day, when the men have returned from their evening wine tapping they gather at the *mambiη*. Then Yefak moves a large sod of a special grass growing there called *nzə* (*co' nzə garu*). Women are made to believe that *garu* lives underground. Yefak sprinkles oil and wine on the sod of grass before he moves it. Then he takes the *garu* instruments, which may be as many as fifteen or more, and puts them down at the small *melak* which is attached to the *mambiη*. He pours wine into his drinking gourd and makes a ritual invocation. Calling the name of the late Yefak whom he succeeded he says, 'N., it was you who gave me this cup. Since you have left us, it is I who continue the work to make crops grow well, as you had done. If I have seized this cup by force and it was not given to me by the people, let the "country spoil". If it is you — if you don't want me to succeed in fixing things as I fix them now, take this wine and *kaηfε lo ba wu* [may bad luck follow you]'. He throws the wine over his shoulder to the west. Then he fills his cup again and continues, 'As I have been given this work, I do it in order to fix everything the same way as you did, so that everything will be fine. May fowls multiply, goats increase, women have children, palm trees leak wine and produce oil. As we are gathered here we look towards the sun.' He throws the wine towards the east. After this he sprays palm wine from his mouth three times over the *garu* instruments.

Now the men take the instruments and the singing and dancing begins. The *garu* instruments are accompanied by a drum (*ncum kpυ*), rattlesacks (*mbak*), and *njaη* (a bundle of bells, similar to those hung around a hunting dog's neck). The dance goes on the whole night (*namə ηka'* — sleep dance). First they dance at the *mambiη*. Later on during the night they go down to Pa Sango's compound and at daybreak they return again to the *mambiη*. After this the men disperse. *Ntesəm* is a rest day.

The following day, *ndes*, all men gather at the *melak* in the evening for another all-night dance. On the next day, *ntezuru*, after the morning wine tapping, *garu* leaves the *mambiη* and goes to the *melak*. Yefak takes the dancers to the first 'compound' (*bu'lak*) where the people have already collected food crops in a basket — maize cobs, heads of guinea corn, cocoyams, palm nuts, and palm kernels. Of each item two or more pieces representing the entire food supply of the *bu'lak* are put in the basket and brought to Yefak. He is also given some food: fufu (boiled and mashed cocoyams), a dish of meat with a lot of oil, and a calabash of wine. As he shows all these things to the

dancers holding them up in the air they laugh (out of happiness). People say that *garu* laughs (*garu ywi*). Next Yefak takes the *garu* instruments from the dancers and puts them to one side, away from the place where he is going to perform the ritual, and covers them with some leaves. Now he turns out the food crops on to the ground, sprinkles oil from the soup on them, and mixes everything. Next he takes the food items one by one and bites off a grain or two from each maize cob, guinea corn head, and mezocarp of the palm nuts and keeps the bits in his mouth. He cracks some dry nuts. If the kernel remains whole he discards it. If it breaks in two he takes one half and puts it in his mouth. All these bits he now chews into pulp. Then he goes to the place where he has kept the *garu* instruments and removing the leaves he spits part of the pulp on them three times. He returns to the food crops lying on the ground and spits the rest of the pulp on them.

Now the boys to be 'shown' *garu* (*fe moa garu*) are brought. These are the same boys who have been initiated into *so*' earlier in the year. As an initiation fee they each have to bring a small basket of fufu and a dish of meat or caterpillars. No fowls or wine are given. Yefak breaks off a small amount of fufu and dips it into the oily soup. He knocks the back of his hand holding the food on the head of the boy and then throws the food on the covered *garu* instruments.

When all the boys have been treated, Yefak tells all present to pick up the food crops on the ground which he has 'blessed'. As the boys and men rush forward trying to grab any item they can get hold off the *so*' maskers suddenly emerge from their hiding-place and, falling on the initiands, manhandle and beat them. The boys, screaming and fighting for their lives, are again rescued by their fathers and taken to their houses. In this context the *so*' maskers are referred to as *so*' *garu*.

The boys are not shown the *garu* instruments. They do not know what is hidden under the leaves nor are they allowed to participate in the activities and dances that follow. Only when they have grown older and can keep a secret (from their mothers and other women) are they shown the cult instruments. *Garu* and *cimbi* go together. There is no separate initiation into the *cimbi* cult. Boys who have 'seen' *garu* also 'see' *cimbi*. The initiation of boys into the different cults at such an early age is a precautionary measure. I was told that it was done to prevent boys being affected by the cults (*ta rum*) if they should inadvertently see the maskers, the cult instruments, or the cult performances.

The food crops grabbed by the lucky ones are either roasted and eaten by them or they may be stored and used as seeds in the planting season. Some use the maize and guinea corn to feed their fowls which are believed to thrive thereafter. Women may not eat of these food items “blessed” by *garu*. Since *garu* which is *rum* is said to have ‘eaten corn’ (*garu zu gambi*) women may not touch it (*ɲwaɲwe e ka jo*). When Yefak has finished ‘blessing’ the crops of one *bu’lak* he takes *garu* to the next one and performs the same ritual there. Having visited all the six *bu’lak* of Nkwi he takes *garu* up to the *shie garu*. The dancers first circle the *mbuk suen* several times before returning to the *shie garu* which they also circle. Yefak sprinkles oil and palm wine on the *shie garu* to ‘cool’ the hamlet. After this all return to the *mambiŋ*. Nowadays, ‘because young people show little or no interest in these traditions’, Yefak does not take *garu* to the different ‘compounds’. Those who are still interested, the traditionalists, join at the *mɛlak* where the ritual is performed for the whole hamlet.

The final dance down through the hamlet from the *shie garu* to the *mambiŋ* is called *garu de gaŋde kpɛ* (*garu* cries death) because it now ‘enters the ground’ again. At the *mambiŋ* the instruments are placed in the wicker basket and then taken to the *nda rum*. The following day, *ntelak*, relatives, friends, and in-laws come from other quarters of Gom and nearby villages with gifts of wine. They are entertained and the women dance *ɲka’ baba* (dance women), also referred to as women’s *garu*. The occasions ends on *nteki* with the *tajo’* dance.

4.2. Some Comments

The *garu* cult is performed to ‘cool’ things (*garu de shie bum*) and to ‘fix’ things (*tsɛpte bum*). That is why *garu* is believed to be god (*nwi*). The cult is performed at the end of the maize harvest (and formerly after the sowing of guinea corn). It is not done in order to allow people to eat new maize. A ritual to this effect has already been performed by Yefak at the beginning of the harvest. *Garu* is brought out to ‘bless’ the crops so that the supply of food should not finish before time. When people eat only a little they should feel as if they had eaten a hearty meal and so the food supply can be stretched to last till the new harvest.

5. *Cimbi*

Next in the ritual calendar of the Yamba follows the *cimbi* cult performance. *Cimbi* is ‘moved out’ (*o to cimbi*) in November, the beginning of the wine tapping season, when the termites (*ɲgok*) fly. This is the reason why the *cimbi*

cult, at least in Nkwi, is known under the name of *cimbi ngok*. *Cimbi* is also the cult which ‘cries deaths’, commonly referred to as *rum kpɛ* (cult, death). The gourd horn band performs during the wake (*namə kpɛ*) of all adult men and of women who have delivered more than one male child. Formerly it also ‘cried the death’ of a leopard (*mbɛ*) or a chimpanzee (*buk*) since leopards are believed to be human transforms and chimpanzees are humanlike animals, but not that of other ‘law animals’. After killing a leopard or chimpanzee the carcass would be placed on the roof of the *cak tu* (skull hut) and *cimbi* would dance the whole night in front of the hut before the animal was butchered in the morning.

The *cimbi* cult instruments consisting of five calabash horns are envisaged in terms of a human family, father, mother, children, and grandmother. The two larger horns called *lu-cimbi* (man *cimbi*) and *ma-cimbi* (mother *cimbi*) respectively are composite in that a long neck cut from a different calabash has been attached to the body of the calabash. The two smaller ones are called ‘children’ (*boa cimbi*). The fifth horn, *ma-tsəm ngwi*, similar to the two larger ones, does not appear at death celebrations. Formerly, before the sowing of guinea corn, Yɛfak took *ma-tsəm ngwi* (mother, to cover, seeds of guinea corn) to the different roads leading into the hamlet to ‘lock’ them by placing *yo* leaves there (*ma’ yo ngwi*). As he went he intoned into the gourd horn in the same way as when *ɲwantap* is brought out to ‘lock’ the roads. At the annual cult performance *ma-tsəm ngwi* is blown by old men. It follows the band, walking slowly because it is said to be old and feeble ‘like a grandmother’.

Although there is no initiation into the *cimbi* cult one can distinguish a rough ranking of two stages, viz., *ruk bwin cimbi* (wine, breasts, *cimbi*) and *kom tu cimbi* (shave or clean, head, *cimbi*). In order to allow a cult member to blow the two big horns (*lu-cimbi* and *ma-cimbi*) he has to provide a jug of wine (*ruk bwin cimbi*). Informants told me that one has to pay to ‘touch the breasts of *cimbi*’. No restrictions apply to the blowing of the smaller horns or the *ma-tsəm ngwi*.

The second stage concerns the mending of a broken horn or the manufacture of a new one. If somebody accidentally breaks a *cimbi* gourd horn (*kɛp ki cimbi* — break foot *cimbi*) he has to pay a fine of one live cock, a cooked fowl with a small basket of fufu, and ten litres of wine. When he brings the fine Foa-Nyongu or some men who have entered the stage of *kom tu cimbi* go to the *mambiŋ*. If the calabash is only cracked and can be repaired it will be stitched (*cɛə ki cimbi*) and the seam locked with resin. Foa-Nyongu guides the man’s hand while he is doing so. He also guides him when he puts a knife

into the hole at the base of the calabash imitating the action of cutting it out. This is called *kom tu cimbi*. Next the beak of the cock is torn and blood applied to the instrument and the man's chest. I was told that this is done because 'he is a new man'. He is now a man who has entered *kom tu cimbi*.

If the calabash is beyond repair it is buried at the *shie so'*. The unlucky man has to pay the same fine as mentioned above, or he can substitute a new calabash for the cock. To make the new instrument Foa-Nyongu holds the man's hand and guides him in cutting out a round hole, about 4 centimetres in diameter, in the base of the calabash (*kom tu cimbi*). He then sprinkles oil from the soup dish on it. A piece of rope (*fə rum*) into which part of the old rope from the broken horn is woven is tied around the neck of the new one. Then a small fire is lit, using dry palm nut chaff, and *liŋ* (resin), *sen* (leaves of a strongly scented shrub), *swi shie* (seeds of a type of pepper), and 'medicine' leaves (*fu rum*) are burnt. The new instrument is held in the rising smoke. This is said to make the *cimbi* instrument dangerous for women to see. Some informants told me that it either makes the cult horn invisible, should a woman inadvertently see it, or she may see a goat instead. The manufacture of a new gourd horn is called *cimbi dzə moa* (*cimbi* delivers child). This is followed by a dance at the *mambij* lasting three days so that the 'papa and mama' may teach the new child the *cimbi* songs and dances. The day before a new instrument is made, women are told that *cimbi* is in labour (*cimbi se bu' dzərə moa*). The family metaphor with its generative connotation is all pervasive in the *cimbi* cult.

Although *cimbi* is *rum* its 'law' is not as strict as in the case of *so'*. Women are free to leave their houses and go to the farm to dig up cocoyams or pick vegetables (but not to work). If they hear *cimbi* dancing at a certain compound they have to take a roundabout way to avoid seeing it.

A myth of origin of the *cimbi* cult is told in Nkwi. It is a version of the flood-myth as recorded by Gebauer (1964: 26), Jeffreys (n.d.), and Moss (n.d.) (E.M Chilver, pers. comm.; see also Chapter Two). The Nkwi version gives Mfe as the place where the flood occurred and adds that the last child of the brother and sister, who were given divine permission to cohabit, since all the other people had died, was *cimbi*.

5.1. The *Cimbi* Cult Performance

Cimbi is 'moved out' in November. On the day of the Yamba week called *ntɛ-zuru*, when the men have returned from their morning wine tapping, Foa-Nyongu takes down the *cimbi* instruments and hands them to Yefak. The

warning song *lo-lo-lo-a-lo* is sounded while Yefak carries the gourd horns to the *melak* where he lays them down in a line. He then throws palm kernels at each instrument three times (Yefak *təm cimbi kwak*) in order to open its mouth (*ŋgə mo cu cimbi*). Now he grinds some chalk and after mixing it with wine he marks the five gourd horns with the white mixture (*o te cimbi mbuəm*) assisted by the junior Yefak. This is said to prevent rain from falling during the cult performances and dances. When *cimbi* ‘enters’ on *nteviq* day water is splashed on the instruments to reverse the above action. While they are busy doing *so*’ cries (*so’ de waa*). The *so*’ cry which is repeatedly sounded during the *cimbi* cult performance is called *ŋkpunjghup*.

Next Yefak pours wine into his cup and makes a ritual statement saying, ‘I am here to “fix” my village as my forefathers have done. Let food come, maize do well, palm trees leak wine and bear fruit in abundance. If somebody brings evil things from outside in order to spoil our village let that thing [*cimbi*] see him. Let that thing attack him.’ He throws the cup of wine over his shoulder to the west. Filling the cup again he continues, ‘If somebody enters the village with fine things, if he does not take wine or oil [by mystical means] and throw it into the bush, that man’s head will shine.’ He throws the cup of wine towards the east. Filling the cup a third time he turns to *cimbi*: ‘This is *cimbi*. My forefathers have “moved out” this thing as I do now. If a person does an evil thing to our village, you will see that person. And you will know the thing you will do to such a person. He/she will die!’ Now the senior Yefak takes a sip of wine and splurts it out on the ground. The junior Yefak does the same. Crouching down on the ground they place their hands on the drinking gourd which Yefak has placed face down on the ground. They remain in this position for about half a minute during which all present keep silence.

Yefak then ‘washes’ the inside of the calabashes by pouring wine into them and shaking them. This is done to improve the sound quality. The gourd horns are not like wind instruments which produce a sound when one blows into them. Rather, they are resonators, amplifying the sound produced by the player’s voice.

Then Yefak hands out four of the five calabashes keeping one to himself. This is done according to a strict rule: *lu-cimbi* (male *cimbi*) is given to a member of Foa-Nyongu’s descent group, *ma-cimbi* (female *cimbi*) to a member of descent group of Bu-Yang. *Ma-tsəm ŋgwi* goes to a member of Ba-Keng descent group and one *moa-cimbi* (child *cimbi*) to the chief’s family. Yefak keeps the other *moa-cimbi*.

All sit down on the ground or crouch down on their haunches. There follows a ‘dialogue’ between Yefak and the rest of the horn players, Yefak intoning into the horn, the men repeating the same tune on a lower pitch. The initial dialogue immediately leads over to the song of the *matitik* dance. This is repeated a second time, all still sitting down. The third time Yefak gets up and the men too stand up when they answer his tune. The prelude is accompanied by the rhythmic shaking of the rattlesacks. After this, still at the *melak*, but now with the drum (*ncum kpɛ* — drum, death), *cimbi* sings all songs in its repertoire, except ‘cry-die’ and *nzɛr*, three times — *ndum sen*, *ɲka’ ɲgwu*, *matitik*, and *mayawe*. The tunes are intoned into the gourd horns and all other men sing along using no words, since these songs are without words.

Having exhausted their repertoire, all proceed to the *mambiŋ* where the dance continues till midday. The dance performed is called *mayawe*. Then there is a break to allow everybody to go and *tap* wine. In the evening, after nightfall, all men gather again at the *mambiŋ* for an all-night dance (*namə ɲka’*). While *cimbi* dances at the *mambiŋ* the cry of *ma-faŋ-moa*, the companion of *cimbi*, is heard. *Ma-faŋ-moa* is another acoustical mask using a reed. The sound produced resembles the cry of a baby, hence the name *ma-faŋ-moa* (mother, cry, child).

During the morning of the second day (*ntelak*), the two Yefak bury a large earthenware pot half into the ground at the *mambiŋ*, placing some leaves under it. Two miniature hoe handles called *kwak kwiŋ* are tied to the neck of the pot with a creeper called *wase*. Nobody is allowed to see them burying the pot. As to the hoe handles I was told the following: if a man, instead of joining the *cimbi* cult performance, goes to the palm bush to work, his right arm (*kwiŋ*) may suddenly lose its dexterity. In order to be cured the man must see the senior Yefak who would ‘make medicine’ to cure him, after having paid a fine. The *kwak kwiŋ* is part of the medicine. The leaves buried under the pot are meant to ‘cool’ the hamlet.

When the men come back from their morning wine tapping they bring each a small calabash of wine which is poured in the large pot. The pot is filled almost to the brim. Then the dance begins and the dancers keep their eyes on the pot. As the sweet wine ferments it rises and spills over. If it overflows in one line everybody shouts *haaaa!* It is a good omen. All is well with the hamlet. This has special significance for the communal hunt. The hunt will be successful. Should the wine overflow in two lines it is said to ‘speak with two mouths’. It is a sign that something is amiss and the diviners are asked to find out where the trouble lies. As soon as the horn players see that the wine in the pot overflows they place the instruments in a line on the ground near the pot.

The next step again concerns the communal hunt, in particular the *nzur* (red feather) society (see Chapter Three). Bumtu, the head of the *nzur* society, is given a small calabash of wine taken from the big pot. He takes it up to the *cak tu* (skull hut) which is situated near the chief's compound. There he sprays wine on the skull shrine and makes a ritual invocation saying that bad animals should pass by the hamlet and good animals enter it. He drinks the rest of the wine before returning to the *mambiŋ*.

Meanwhile, at the *mambiŋ*, wine is poured in a large drinking gourd (*ŋgap sɛ*) and two men, joining their heads together cheek to cheek, drink the wine simultaneously. They are given two cups of wine to drink. This is called *sə ruk* (*sə* means 'froth' or 'foam', *ruk* is 'wine'). The two men, one from Bu-Fəm and one from Ma-Kwak, represent the two 'sides' (*ŋfu*) of Nkwi. *Sə ruk* is done to bring the two 'sides' together, to enhance the unity of the hamlet. To drink from one cup is part of the rite of reconciliation.

Next, the hamlet chief is given three cups of wine (*cuəkə ŋkum*). According to my informants this is closely connected with the foregoing. If the chief is not present, his son or a member of his compound is given the wine instead. Should none of them be in attendance the man who divides the wine will pour three cups of wine next to the stone where the chief is supposed to sit saying, 'Foa-Makong, this is yours.' The chief is given wine because 'he is the head' of the hamlet, the embodiment of unity. This episode makes it clear that in order to be successful in the communal hunt the hamlet must be united. The *cimbi* cult is instrumental in bringing all men of the hamlet together. Everybody brings wine which is poured in a common pot from which all drink.

After the chief has been served, the wine is shared out to all men present. This too is done according to a strict rule. The man serving the wine has to start first from the right and a second time from the left side. This is done so that male and female children should be born equally. If the wine were served only from the right side, the women of Nkwi would only deliver male children.

Now the senior Yefak pours wine into the calabash horns to 'wash' them. What then follows is a repetition of what was done at the *melak* the day before — the handing out of the instruments to the members of the different descent groups, the prelude, while all the players are seated on the ground, and the dances, with the addition of the 'cry die' dance. The dances go on till about one o'clock in the afternoon.

When the men return from the palm bush in the evening they all keep a calabash of wine in their compounds because *cimbi* will visit every compound

(*bu'lak*) during the night, dancing and singing. The dancers time their movement up through the hamlet so that the first light of day (on the day *nteki*) meets them at the *shie garu*. From there they return to the *mambiŋ* of Lower Nkwi.

After the morning wine tapping the men prepare to 'fix' their palm bushes. Accompanied by some female dependents of their descent group (*nje'gu*) they go to the different *mbuk kop* (stone, palm bush) also called *dzok kop* (shrine, palm bush). The *nje'gu* place new 'medicine' leaves under the stones, rub them with oil, and spray wine over them making a ritual invocation. When they have finished their work in the palm bush they return to the compound and fix the 'senior' *mbuk kop* there. Then they prepare food — a dish of meat with a basket of fufu and a calabash of wine — for the *cimbi* band and dancers who will visit the *mbuk kop* of every compound. When *cimbi* arrives, Yefak takes the food and the wine. He throws some food and sprinkles oil on the *mbuk kop*. Before sharing the wine he blows a mouthful on the shrine three times. Having eaten the food and drunk the wine *cimbi* sings and dances for a while before proceeding to the next compound. All the compounds are visited and their *mbuk kop* 'fixed' except that of the senior Yefak. After the evening wine tapping another all-night dance follows.

On *ntebom* day in the afternoon, *cimbi* leaves the *mambiŋ* and goes to the senior Yefak's palm bush to 'fix' his own *mbuk kop*. Returning to the hamlet *cimbi* 'cries death' (the tune *cimbi* sings during the wake) because 'tomorrow it is going away, tomorrow *cimbi* enters'. A final all-night dance, during which *cimbi* dances again from compound to compound, ends at the *shie garu* in the morning. Singing *ŋka' ŋgwɛ* and 'crying death' they circle the shrine several times. When *cimbi* leaves the *shie garu* they run singing *nzɛr yuyum* (the song of the members of the *nzɛr* society who have not killed a 'law animal'). On reaching Bu-Yang they change their song to *nzɛr cocoŋ* (the song of the hunters who have killed a law animal). They dance to the edge of the chief's main yard where they can look down on the *cak tu*. Informants told me that *cimbi* which 'owns' *nzɛr* is saying farewell to the *cak tu* till it 'comes out' again next year.

From the *cak tu* the dancers run down to Foa-Nyongu's compound still singing *nzɛr cocoŋ*. There they dance *mayawɛ* and *ŋka' ŋgwɛ* till they are given a calabash of new wine. Then *cimbi* crosses over to the *melak* where Yefak takes the instruments and lines them up. He again throws kernels at the horns three times, this time to 'lock their mouths'. After this he splashes water on them to wash off the white chalk, so symbolically 'releasing the rain' which had been 'locked', before *cimbi* is put back into the loft of the *nda rum*.

If it is a year when termites fly in great numbers (usually every two or three years) *cimbi* must refrain from singing *nzur*, otherwise the termites would stop flying. They would remain ‘stuck’ in the ground. *Cimbi* would prevent them from coming out. So in the years of termites *cimbi* would only sing *mayawε* when coming down from the *shie garu* before entering. This variation seems to be peculiar to Nkwi. I was not given any reason why this should be so.

On *nteviη*, the women will prepare food to entertain relatives and friends who will come from other hamlets or villages for the dance in the evening. They dance the women’s *garu* (*ηka’ baba*), and if rain does not fall also *ηka’ ηgwε*. The dancing continues the following day with *tajo’*.

The annual performance of the *cimbi* cult has an ‘appendix’. Some weeks after *cimbi* has ‘entered’ (*cimbi nyi ti*), on a *ntεzuru*, when Nchak quarter ‘moves out’ *cimbi*, Yefak takes the cult instruments to the *mambiη* of Upper Nkwi. Those men who are interested meet him there and after dancing for a short while Yefak ‘opens’ the three exits leading out of the *mambiη* and the horn band and dancers are now free to go and dance anywhere they like. Somebody may invite them to his palm bush or his compound, entertaining them with wine. The dance, called *majom ηgoη*, may go on for one or two weeks. No rites take place. It is just for pleasure and enjoyment, I was told.

5.2. Some Comments

As with other cults, Yamba traditionalists believe that *cimbi* is a divinity (*nwi*), or rather a manifestation of god. That is why the cult is said to be effective. *Cimbi* ‘fixes’ things (*tsεpte bum*). While *garu* is concerned with food-crops (maize, guinea corn, cocoyams), the production of palm oil and caterpillars (*ηkuη*), *cimbi* leans in the direction of palm wine, hunting and termites. The timing of the *cimbi* cult performance is not just conventional. *Cimbi* is “moved out” at the beginning of the wine tapping season. It is the month when the termites fly and the hunting season is near. *Cimbi* is instrumental in promoting unity and solidarity among the people of the hamlet, pre-conditions for a successful hunt.

The *cimbi* cult performance has a complicated choreography directed by the priest Yefak. Ritual and play intermingle. With so many things going on it is easy to miss some of the details but I think I have pointed out the main notions which are foremost in people’s minds.

Summary and Conclusion

In this chapter I have tried to give a detailed description of three of the more important cults of the Yamba, *so' tap*, *garu*, and *cimbi*, and recorded how Yamba understand these cults. Out of necessity I have had to restrict myself to the practices of Nkwi hamlet since the cult performances are closely linked to the spatial, political, and social dimensions of a hamlet which are not the same for other hamlets. To generalize would mean to lose out on many subtleties and important details. But the overall practice of the cult performances is the same all over Lower Yamba.

Traditionally, Yamba believed all *rum* to be god(s) (*nwi*), or rather manifestations of the same god. This can be seen most clearly when *so' tap* is 'moved out'. Nobody is allowed to see the *ɲkɲp so'* blower as he passes through the hamlet placing leaves at the different shrines, blowing the *ɲkɲp so'* flute, and sounding the *so'* cry. Cult performances are effective precisely because they are god(s). The different cults are brought out to 'fix things' (*tsəpte bum*) and they have the power to do so because they are embodiments of god.

But it is not the cult instruments or maskers as such which are believed to be god(s), only the cult performances. When *cimbi* performs at a wake it is not considered to be god nor is *so' ghaŋ* believed to be a god when it 'appears' after a duiker or antelope has been killed at the communal hunt.

Although there are some minor cults among the Yamba which are owned by particular descent groups, the major cults are owned by the hamlet as a whole. The hamlet chief and Foa-Nyongu are their custodians, not owners. Yefak is the main officiant, or more precisely the priest, of the three cults we have discussed. But Yefak has no hand in the *ɲwantap* cult. This is in line with his status as priest. *ɲwantap*, controlled by the chief, Foa-Nyongu and the leaders of descent groups, 'catches' and 'kills' people. It is the most important cult and it is the cause of a particular disease or misfortune and its cure (except in cases of cannibal witches). Such a function is incompatible with the office of Yefak whose main work is to 'fix things'. All major Yamba cults are somehow interconnected. The *so'* mask appears during the *garu* cult performance and *so'* 'cries' when *cimbi* is brought out. When Yefak locks the roads before the sowing of guinea corn (*ma' yo ɲgwi*) he intones the *ɲwantap* warning song into the *ma-tsə ɲgwi* horn. Ritual invocations invariably state that *so'* or *cimbi* will 'see' evildoers, but it is *ɲwantap* which 'catches' and 'kills' them. All this points to the fact that there is a close connection between the major Yamba cults, *ɲwantap* being the most important.

It will have been noticed that extremely few leaves or none at all are associated with the major Yamba cults discussed. *So*' places *yo* and *mbambuəm* leaves at the different shrines and, when it exchanges leaves with Nchak, adds leaves of the maize plant. The *mbambuəm* leaf is used in the initiation rite into the *so*' cult. Some leaves are placed beneath the pot when it is buried at the *mambiŋ* on the second day of the *cimbi* cult performance. *Garu* does not use any leaves at all. Neither do any of these cults have 'medicines'. Since they do not cause particular diseases there is no need for them.

Entrance payments into the cults are low. To 'show' a boy *so*' he has to give two fowls, a basket of fufu, and a jug of wine. To 'see' *garu* the initiand only has to give a small dish of meat and some fufu. Nothing is given to 'see' *cimbi*. Related to the low entrance payments is the lack of real ranking in these cults. An indication of ranking can be discovered in the *cimbi* cult with its two stages *ruk bwin cimbi* and *kom tu cimbi*. But no prestige attaches to these stages. All this mirrors the state of Yamba society which is extremely egalitarian.

Yamba cults are anthropomorphised. The different *rum* dance, sing, eat, and drink; they 'fix things'; *cimbi* 'cries deaths'; *so*' sees and carries; etc. Cult instruments and performances are forbidden to women and the uninitiated. They are made to believe that *garu* emerges from the ground. Their unnatural sounds and noises (voice disguisers, the *so*' cry, gourd horns) are associated with the bush and with danger. This notion of danger is reinforced when women see the bloody backs of their sons or husbands during the *so*' cult performances.

Finally, it has been remarked with some surprise that in the western Grassfields there are no rites of initiation for boys when they are circumcised. This is also the case with the Yamba. Looking at the initiation into *so*' *tap* and *garu* cults one can detect many components which feature prominently in the rites of initiation of other African peoples: the boys are shown the *sacra* of the cults, the maskers appear to frighten them, their manhood is tested by caning, they are bound to secrecy, and so on. Rather than surmise the existence of boys' initiation at circumcision among the Yamba in the past I would say that we have here an alternative, a different development. What boys in other African cultures experience and learn in bush circumcision camps during the rites of initiation, Yamba boys are taught during cult performance.