

## Chapter 2 Ethnography

### 2.1. Geography

The Tikar Plain is situated in the Northern part of Cameroon and is bound on three sides by the Adamawa Plateau, the Mambila Plateau, and the Bamoun Plateau (fig. 2.1). Its fourth boundary is demarcated by the river Mape (Zeitlyn, 1994: 20). This highly fertile forest-savannah environment, classified as a mix of Sudano- Zambezan and Guinea Sudanian phytogeographical zones (Letouzey, 1985, in Zeitlyn 1994), has an annual rainfall of 2200-



Figure 1. Arrow indicates location of Somié (map from Institute National de Cartographie; scale 1: 1 500 000).

3000mm/yr with a mean annual temperature of approximately 29C°. It is considered as extremely diverse with local variations of plants not found in other places (Dounias et al., 2001). Somié village is located at 6.30° N 11.30°E at an altitude of 750 metres<sup>1</sup> and has a single annual rainy season from March until October with November to February being the dry season (fig.1).

---

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix I, fig. 1

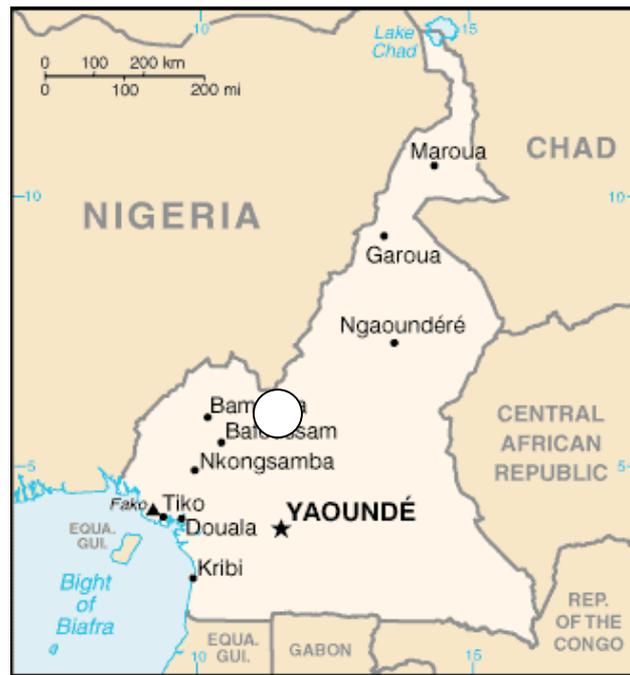


Figure 2. Circle shows the Tikar Plain<sup>2</sup>

## 2.2. The Mambila

The Mambila on the Tikar Plain arrived in the last 150-200 years in three migration waves from the Mambila Plateau and the adjoining areas of the Adamawa Plateau (Zeitlyn, 1994: 24), conquering earlier immigrants, at times, with the help of slave-raiding Fulbe, and pushing the autochthonous Tikar further south into the Tikar Plane. The canton of Somié extends over an area of approximately 240 square kilometres and had, at the date of the 1986 tax census, a population of 1,777. Great population shifts have affected the area as a consequence of the completion of the Mape River dam in 1987 and have led to increased immigration into the Somié canton. Today, the Mambila are spread over three villages (Atta, Sonkolong, and Somié) and make up an estimated population of 10,000-15,000 (Zeitlyn, pers. comm., 08.08.09). Low population densities and prospects for fertile farmland and other jobs in the area have been attracting large numbers of immigrants mainly from neighbouring Nigeria where the Mambila have been facing a serious land crisis (Hurault 1998).

From the 1950s onwards, immigration has affected biological diversity mainly by deforestation for cash cropping coffee and for farmland<sup>3</sup> as well as by hunting<sup>4</sup>, while

<sup>2</sup> Link to photo: <a title="Country Information Of The World" href="http://www.appliedlanguage.com/country\_guides/Cameroon.shtml">Cameroon Information</a> from the <a title="Website Translation" href="http://www.appliedlanguage.com/">Translation Site</a>

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix I, figure 1 and 2.

cultural diversity has been influenced by a process of rapid changes in the religious and ethnic composition of the village. Due to the historic dominance of the Fulbe who raided the Mambila for slaves, there has been pressure toward converting to Islam for prestige. However, there is a strengthening ethnic pride amongst the Mambila. Speaking in the local Mambila dialect<sup>5</sup> and practicing the traditional religion of the **Sua** are effective ways to express this cultural and ethnic pride and resilience in the face of cultural and political pressures related to the old conflict with the Fulbe, which is, most recently, reflected in the agro-pastoralist conflicts.

### 2.3. Religion

Somié is a village rich in religions that coexist in a considerably harmonious relationship. Beside the traditional religion, **Sua**, which is practiced by most of the ethnic Mambila and arrived with the first wave of Mambila immigration in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the main world religions present are Christianity (66%) and Islam (approximately 33%). There are two Christian churches and, presently, a mosque is being built to accommodate the growing numbers of Nigerian Mambila immigrants as well as other Muslim ethnicities. The coexistence of these religions is promoted by flexibility around the timing of ritual events, and chiefs of Mambila villages have been rescheduling dates for the **Sua** masquerades in order to enable Muslim Mambila to practice Ramadan as well as to participate in the masquerades.

The practice of **Sua** can be considered an ethnic marker and is the most important feature uniting Nigerian and Cameroonian Mambila. In addition to this, Mambila commonly subscribe additionally to one of the other world religions. To illustrate the widespread practice of **Sua** in Somié, Zeitlyn notes that he only knew “of one man (a catechist) who refused to use divination because of his Christian belief” (Zeitlyn, 1994:15). The main features of the Mambila traditional religion are the belief in witchcraft (**lɔp**), oath taking, and the **Sua** masquerades, which are held separately; the men’s every year and the women’s every two years.

---

<sup>4</sup> Large mammals in the area had been decimated by the early 80s, and the last hippo that inhabited the Lake Myam, died in 2002 (D. Zeitlyn, pers. comm.).

<sup>5</sup> Nigerian and Cameroonian Mambila dialects vary greatly and Ffulde is commonly used as a language of communication (D. Zeitlyn, pers. comm.)

#### 2.4. Demography and social organisation

Somié is the smallest of the three Mambila villages. Its nucleated settlement of approximately 2000 is surrounded by farmland and outlying hamlets whose residents raise the population of the village to approximately 3000 (Zeitlyn, pers. comm.).

Ethnically, Fulbe, Konja (also called Kwanja) and Mambila migration into the area has characterized the inter-ethnic knowledge exchange between the various cultures, and it is not uncommon for people to speak several local languages. The population of Somié is made up of Mambila, Fulbe, Yamba, Tikar and Mbororo with the village centre being to a large extent inhabited by Mambila. The official language of education is French and the commonly spoken *lingua franca* of the area is Ffulde.

The phenomenon of “Fulbeisation” is based on the historic status of the Fulbe as the dominant ethnic group and former slave raiding people (Gausset 1998). Still today, there is a certain level of distinction between Fulbe and non-Fulbe people, which is demonstrated by their monopoly over cattle breeding, and the fact that a Fulbe woman cannot marry a non-Fulbe man. However, ethnic mixing has been taking place between the Mambila and the more sedentary Fulbe, and mixed marriages between Fulbe men and Mambila women are accepted. In recent years, the political head of the wider area, the Lamido of Banyo, has emphasised the importance of a more egalitarian attitude, and the Mambila in Somié have experienced a strengthened sense of ethnic pride (D. Zeitlyn, pers. comm.).



Figure 3. Yamba ceremony in front of chief's palace (photo R.K.)

As political and spiritual head of the village, the chief (**mgbe**) exercises executive authority (such as organizing communal labour), and acts “as an arbitrator in the first instance and as a chairman in tribunal hearings before the village Notables” (Zeitlyn 1994: 41). He is also the political representative of the village and the mediator between the village and the external authorities. The Notables (**Bok Kuku bok**) are older men who are “recruited by a combination of age and both peer and self- selection” (Zeitlyn, 1994:44). They assist the chief with decision- making, and may, in his absence, hear cases. The outlying hamlets are headed by headmen (**Jauro**), who are under the authority of the chief.

The large majority of the Mambila population are agriculturalists farming individually owned fields. Over the past 20 years various other occupations (i.e. healers, barbers, teachers, market vendors), which are exercised in tandem with farming, have diversified the income base of the village<sup>6</sup>. By 1985, the amount of surplus income had been made visible by the replacement of two thirds of thatch roofs with metal roofs (Zeitlyn, 1994: 54), and more recently, by the growing number of little shops (at least 5 in the village centre), bars selling expensive bottled beer, motorbikes and cars. Men also search for employment in the surrounding area, and Cameroon- wide.

The typical Mambila compound in the centre of Somié comprises of more than one household with kin clustering together without a fixed pattern (Zeitlyn, 1994:29) Muslim Mambila and Fulbe often fence their compounds with a brick wall, while Christian Mambila live in open, unfenced compounds or enclose their residential units with hedge forming plants. Compound structures include huts built of sun dried bricks with thatch or metal roofing, and include indoor and outdoor cooking places, granaries (due to theft increasingly replaced by storage areas above fire hearths), small huts for live stock, and outdoor bath houses. In polygamous marriages, wives tend to have their own houses, although there are individual arrangements where wives live under the same roof but have their own sleeping quarters.

---

<sup>6</sup> See Appendix II. Table 1.



Figure 4. typical Mambila house in the centre of the village (photo R.K.)

### 2.5. Subsistence agriculture

As in many other parts of Africa (Etkin, et al, 1994) the economic base of Somie is intensive, largely non-mechanized agriculture supplemented by live stock raising (cattle monopolised by Fulbe people, pigs by Mambila, goats by both) and trade in food crops and plant products, as well as locally manufactured commodities. Corn (*Zea mays*), cassava (*Manihot esculenta*), yam (Dioscoreaceae), cocoyam (taro, *Colocasia esculenta*), oilpalm (*Elaeis guineensis*) and groundnuts (*Arachis hypogaea*) are grown as staple crops and, since the 1950s, coffee (*Coffea robusta*) as a major cash crop. Corn and groundnuts are increasingly being grown as a cash crop, by both men and women (figure 5). This production is supplemented by various leafy vegetables, wild plant collecting, small-scale livestock management (chicken, pigs, goats), fishing, trading plant related products (such as plantains (*Musa* spp.), basketry and crafts. Land tenure is gendered and men and women have their own fields, sharing the responsibility for household food production. Crop production is largely polycultural in fields and home gardens (**kapti**) of different sizes that host plant assemblages of varying complexities. Cultivation, weeding and harvesting are labour intensive human activities assisted by hired tractors for initial ploughing, and periods of intense fieldwork are often organised in work parties in order to get optimum access to labour from the community (Zeitlyn, 1994:54)<sup>7</sup>.

---

<sup>7</sup> There are men's work parties to work on men's fields, house construction and communal work such as fixing roads and bridges, as well as women's work parties to organize work on women's fields. Work parties supply food and beer and are financed through credit union affiliations.



Figure 5. Veyo Marguerite in her groundnut field.(photo R.K.)

## 2.6. Education and language

Somié has one state and one mission primary school and is currently building a secondary school. Formal education follows the French system of primary education<sup>8</sup> and is exclusively held in French language with most teachers being employed from outside the community. How many children from one household will attend which of the two schools and at which age, depends largely on the family's income. While the government school is cheaper, the quality of education is believed to be better in the mission school. Generally, parents prioritise boys' education over girls, and it is uncommon for a girl to continue in secondary education after the age of 15.

## 2.7. The market

Located in the centre of the village, the market of Somié is renowned in the wider area where vendors from as far as Bankim (c. 70 km away) trade imported consumer goods (torches,

---

<sup>8</sup> Primary education takes place, generally between the ages of 6 and 11 and leads to the CEPE : certificat d'études primaire élémentaires ( accessed on 29.08.09 on <http://www.pon.nic.in/rti/schooledu/faq.pdf>

radios, cloth and clothing, domestic utensils, farming implements, cosmetics, paraffin and both Western and traditional medicine) with the villagers who trade cash crops such as corn (*Zea mays*) coffee (*Coffea robusta*) and the medicinally valued seeds of **métok** (*Voacanga* spp.), sell staple crops, fruits and vegetable, palm oil, crafts as well as cooked food and snacks and locally produced corn beer (**kpata**) and palm wine. Since 1952, the market has been held every Saturday in order to increase chances to make money (Zeitlyn, 1994: 55). Fluctuating prices for cash crops have been a concern for the chief, lately, who complained about difficulties to regulate prices, as villagers tend to sell their staple crop stores too cheaply. This tends to happen anytime people need money for various reasons, such as illness in the family, funerals and weddings, schooling expenses, bride wealth or the reroofing of a house. Some of these financial needs are met by membership of rotating credit societies, but petty cash for the commodities needed for everyday life is still largely generated by women’s trading activities in the market.<sup>9</sup>



Figure 6. Girls at the market selling maize based snacks (photo R.K.)

---

<sup>9</sup> This emphasis on trading has been expressed by the recent use of the word **gu** for both buying and selling, whereas literally, it means strictly “buying” (Zeitlyn, pers. comm.)

## 2.8. Agro- pastoralist conflict

The main conflict between the cattle raising Fulbe and other transhumant groups such as the Mbororo has been caused by complex social, political, cultural and historical factors” (Gausset, 2005: 90; Hurault, 1998) and is known locally and Cameroon- wide as the “agro-pastoralist conflict”. The Tikar Plain borders the Mambila Plateau in Nigeria, and has, for the past 30 to 40 years, been a transhumance destination during the dry season when cattle moves largely unsupervised during the night, eat cassava and dry season maize, damage coffee plantations and eat maize from storage granaries in the fields. “What is seen as a resource by herders (grass, movement, random bush fires) is seen as a nuisance by farmers, and vice versa (fields, fallow, and forested areas)” (Gausset, 2005:98). In sum, these dissonances lead to conflicting systems of management, rights and ownership, conflicting structures of power and justice (as the Muslim pastoralists have the support of the Lamido of Banyo), and conflicting ethics over who should come first (Gausset, 2005).



Figure 7. Cattle herds of sedentary Fulbe pastoralists moving through the savanna (photo R.K.)