

Mbum Circumcision Songs

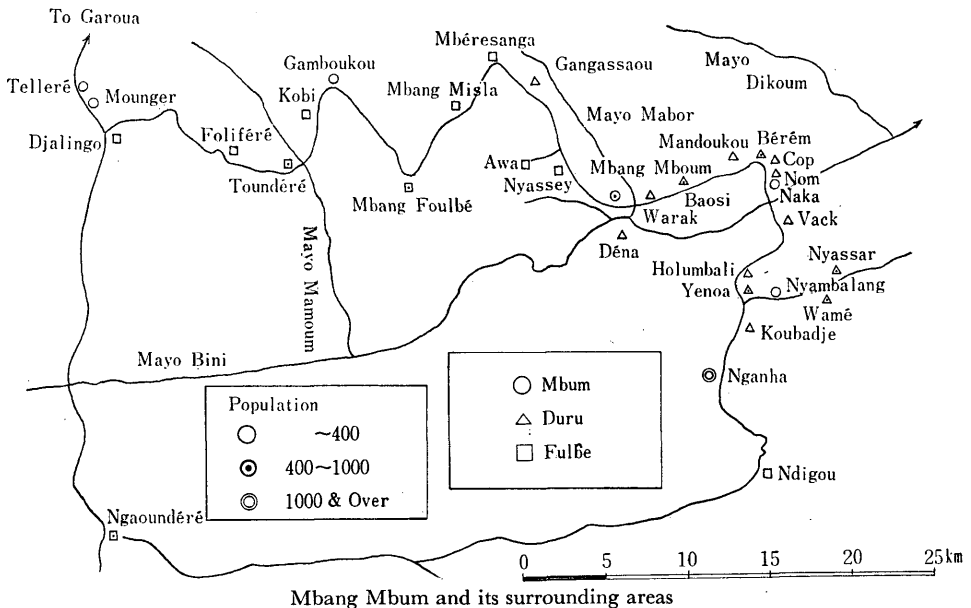
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Mbum Circumcision Songs

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The purpose of this paper is to present the texts of the Mbum circumcision songs, and to provide materials for the regional study of Northern Cameroun. The songs were collected in September 3-9, 1974 in Mbang Mbum.¹⁾

Since 1969, I have been studying various types of Fulbe oral literature in Northern Cameroun, from folktales, pastoral poems, Islamic poems, riddles, etc. to ritualistic chants such as those employed in the circumcision rite.²⁾ During



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1) This research was carried out during the third scientific mission to Northern Cameroun (1974-75), headed by Shun'ya Hino, Professor of social anthropology at the Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies. The project was sponsored by the Japanese Ministry of Education.

Since 1969, Professor Hino has centered his studies around the sociology of the people of Mbang Mbum. He invited me to stay there for a week in this typical Adamawan village. Due to his excellent relationship with the villagers, I was looked upon not as a stranger, but as the guest of a well known personality in the village. This factor greatly facilitated my collection of materials.

For studies in Northern Cameroun, see [TOMIKAWA, 1971 a], [TOMIKAWA, 1971 b] and [HINO, 1975].

2) A description of the Fulbe circumcision songs in Diamaré Prefecture is given in [EGUCHI, 1973].

a stay in Naoundéré, I attempted to find out what circumcision songs were sung among the Adamawa Fulbe and was informed that they employ the chants sung in Mbum, as some other Adamawa peoples do. The first words of these songs, *gún ndòyri* 'novices' aroused my interest and prompted me to collect the series of Mbum circumcision songs. I was able to obtain this information without much difficulty thanks to my colleague, Shun'ya Hino, who had already built up a close relationship with the Mbum villages during his field study there.

The investigation was done using Fulfulde, the regional language of North Cameoun.³⁾ The transcription of the Mbum words are rather phonetic, although I did not bracket them in [].⁴⁾ The orthography for the Fulfulde is the one adopted at the UNESCO 'Meeting of Experts for the Unification of Alphabets of the National Languages' held at Bamako in February-March 1966.

The Mbum people engage in swidden agriculture, and partially in hunting, which is traditionally important [HINO, 1974: p. 4]. They speak Mbum language, Adamawa-Eastern subfamily, Niger-Congo family [GREENBERG, 1963]. Their population is approximately 25,000 [PODLEWSKI, 1971].

Mbang Mbum is one of the five Mbum capital villages headed by divine chiefs, the other four being Nganha, Mana, Mbere, and Mbusa. It has been observed that despite the Fulbe political rule and Islamization, the villages have kept of their traditions [HINO, 1974: p. 6].

The adoption of the Mbum circumcission songs by the Fulbe implies a good

3) Discussions of the linguistic situation of Fulfulde in Northern Cameroun are found in [LACROIX, 1962], and [EGUCHI, 1971].

4) The following thirty-one consonants were observed:

<i>p</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>c</i>	<i>k</i>	<i>kp</i>
<i>b</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>j</i>	<i>g</i>	<i>gb</i>
<i>mb</i>	<i>nd</i>		<i>ŋg</i>	
<i>ɓ</i>	<i>d'</i>			
<i>m</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>ny</i>	<i>ŋ</i>	
<i>f</i>	<i>s</i>	<i>ʃ</i>	<i>h</i>	
<i>v</i>	<i>z</i>			
	<i>l</i>			
<i>v^b</i>	<i>r</i>			
<i>w</i>	<i>ʝ</i>			

It should be noted that *v^b* as in the case of *v^b ènɛŋ* 'god', is a flapped voiced consonant; *ny, ɲ* of I.P.A.; *j, ʃ* of I.P.A.; and *'*, *ʔ* of I.P.A.

It may be said that there are oppositions in vowels: oral/nasal and short/long.

Short Oral		Short Nasal	
<i>i</i>	<i>u</i>	<i>ĩ</i>	<i>ũ</i>
<i>e</i>	<i>o</i>	<i>ẽ</i>	<i>õ</i>
<i>a</i>		<i>ã</i>	
Long Oral		Long Nasal	
<i>ii</i>	<i>uu</i>	<i>ĩĩ</i>	<i>ũũ</i>
<i>ee</i>	<i>oo</i>	<i>ẽẽ</i>	<i>õõ</i>
<i>aa</i>		<i>ãã</i>	

Three tones were observed: high level, low level, and falling. They are marked with ^ˊ, ^ˋ, and ^ˆ.

relationship between the Mbum and the other Adamawa peoples.⁵⁾

The Mbum Circumcision Rite

The Mbum circumcision is called *ndéù†*,⁶⁾ and the verb to circumcise is *ndé ndéù†*. The Mbum people employ *haddordu* as a Fulfulde equivalent for *ndéù*.⁷⁾ It is an essential rite for Moslem males, and an indispensable "rite de passage" for Mbum children attaining manhood.⁸⁾

It is tabu to speak about the circumcision rite to women or to those who are not yet circumcised. When a person breaks this tabu, he is punished.

The circumcision takes place at the beginning of the rainy season from April to June, when a boy reaches the age of eight to ten. When he attains the right age, elder boys tell him the story of circumcision. They say that there is a huge monster in the bush called *fée mbáká*, who can step with one foot on the river Bini, a small river in Mbang Mbum, and with the other on Ngaoundéré. Out of curiosity, the novice wishes to go to see it. He must get up early in the morning, and wander in the bush for several days in search of this legendary monster.⁹⁾

There is a hut called *dánkì* built newly in the bush for the circumcision. There is even a fire place in it. The novices eat special dishes every day, and wander around in the vicinity of the hut looking for the monster. The life of the boys in the bush is supervised by a leader called *nyággòlà*. During the training, they wear leaves in the daytime and sleep naked at night.

One day they are called one after another and circumcised by removing the

5) This is not the only evidence that the Mbum showed hospitality toward the Fulbe coming into Adamawa for pasturage before the *jihad* took place in the nineteenth century. The following passages, cited from Kurt Strumpel's work by Froelich, may explain the situation:

Aux XVIII^e siècle, partant de Nigéria, et notamment du plateau Baoutchi, ils s'infiltrèrent dans les hauts-plateau du Cameroun à la recherche de nouveaux pâturages. Ils se soumettent humblement aux chefs noirs du pays, musulmans ou païens, ne font point de prosélytisme et accordent aux petits chefs indigènes, le *jus primae noctis*. (Cited from "Histoire de l'Adamaoua" by Kurt Strumpel, p. 8, FROELICH)

6) The † mark signifies that the word comes from Professor Shun'ya Hino's source.

7) In Fulfulde, there are several different expressions which have the meaning of 'to circumcise': *juulna*, *hadda*, and *remna*. The first one has the religious sense of making the person a Moslem, whereas *hadda* and *remna*, may have the nuance of initiation into manhood.

8) The following Adamawan tribes practice circumcision rites. There are descriptions of these in Podlewski's work:

In between *Massifs de Poli* and Adamawa plateau, there are people called Voko (Population circa 3,000)...Circumcision, which has been practised for a long time, is the only remainder which could survive through the Islamic chanel (p. 62).

Niamniam. Population: 6,000. Living in Tignere Prefecture, West of Adamawa Plateau.

Circumcision (Nillegri) is also practiced and the circumcision knives (Djom) are without doubt, the object of sacrifices, as among the Duru (p. 83).

To the east of Voko live the Kolbila. Circumcision is practised as before, independently of Moslem influence (p. 73).

All Duru boys who reached the age of fourteen years should be circumcised; if not, they are not allowed later to participate in any ceremonies or village festivals (p. 26).

foreskin. After the circumcision, they apply alcohol and powder for sterilization. Then, they bandage the part with leaves called *àndiwi*¹⁰⁾. The penis is supported by a triangular supporter made of cornstalk. The Mbum do not use a Y-shaped supporter as the Fulbe in Diamaré prefecture.

A blacksmith (*kilà* or *bélaká mbák*)[†] takes the role of circumciser (*dòinà*). He has a special knife, called *gún jèn*. Each parent gives him about two hundred francs as a present for his work.

There is an order among those who are to be circumcised, decided by the elders of the village. The children of important vassals are first, followed by *bélaká*'s children, and then by ordinary Mbang Mbum children. Next follow those from outside the village, such as Fulbe children from Mambram, and Duru children from Baosi, Warak, Sabongari etc.

After the circumcision, children who are circumcised together call each other *wàì* or *wàì àm*, and keep a good relationship with each other throughout their lives. They stay in the hut with young boys who have been circumcised a few years before. During this training they learn circumcision songs, hunting, the manner of obeying elder boys, and how to have sexual intercourse. The novices are beaten and tortured with twigs inserted between fingers. They go to the river and wash themselves during the daytime. When the boys are in the bush, their mothers prepare treats for them by turns. The mothers are not allowed to see them.

In the past, the novices stayed in the bush for a few months, but they are now allowed to return to the village after a month or less. The fathers and *ndapám* 'mother's brother' give them home-made beer, meat, and so forth. Sometimes a goat or money is given to them. The children wear new shoes, clothes and a cap.

Parents give two or three hundred francs to the leader or *nyàngòlà* to express

- 9) The Duru say that during the circumcision trial, a panther called *zak*, and a monster called *hen cien* 'monster with imaginary noise', appear and watch the whole process.

In Vute, they call the monster *fè mbáká* 'a black monster', which could be a Mbum word.

In Bata, the imaginary monster is called *féjgbáká*.

Meek reports on the monster, which he calls *dòdóo*:

During the initiation the presence of the Dodo or tutelary genius is felt. The boys see him at a distance, and learn to fear him. His cry is heard at night. After this preliminary training the boys are ready for circumcision [MEEK, 1925: Vol. II, p. 38].

Through the initiation rites the boys become men of the tribe, they receive a new nature, and are mystically united with their ancestors and the tutelary genius (*Dodo*) of the tribe [MEEK, 1925: Vol. II, p. 87].

This toy, composed of a stick and a string with a piece of twig attached to it, is called *fée mbáká* after the monster. It is said that when the top spins around, it makes enough noise to threaten girls. See Figure 1 at right.

- 10) Meek describes the method commonly followed by Moslems in performing the circumcision rite:

The barber fits a protective triangle of guniea-corn stalks on the end of the penis. If the bleeding is excessive bandages of hemp-leaves are applied [MEEK, 1925: Vol. II, p. 86].

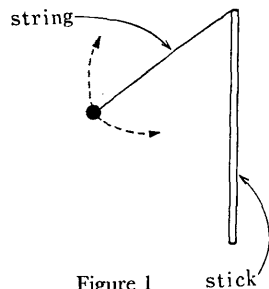


Figure 1 stick

their gratitude.

One year after the circumcision the boys have their first sexual intercourse with a girl in Ngaoundéré, or with a *ajabaajo* 'widow' in Sabongari, a Duru village two kilometers away from Mbang Mbum. Some, however, go without this experience.

Texts

I obtained ten songs from the following boys: 1) Hammaadu Sarkiya, eldest son of a vassal, 2) Abbo Sarkiya, second son of the same vassal, and 3) Muusa Kilaa. They all experienced the circumcision several years ago in Mbang Mbum.

The Mbum texts are followed by Fulfulde, and the English translations show a rough correspondence of meaning.

1. This is the first song sung by the children. It is the most popular of all. When one mentions the circumcision, it is recalled immediately.

<i>fée hòy tîiwá wò</i> 1 2 3 4	<i>Huunde ladde wurti, hey.</i> 1 2 3 4
<i>gún ndòŋ-ri</i> 5 6	<i>Kaddiikon,</i> 5 6
<i>nda nam bda</i> 7 8 9	<i>taa daanu.</i> 7 9 8
<i>fée kée tîiwá wò</i> 10 11 12 13	<i>Huunde feere wurti, hey.</i> 10 11 12 13

The monster of the bush has come out, hey.
1 2 3 4

Circumcised children,
6 5

don't sleep.
7 9 8

Another monster has come out, hey.
11 10 12 13

(Singer: Hammaadu Sarkiya)

2.

<i>nyàngòlà wò</i> 1 2	<i>Aynoowo, hey</i> 1 2
<i>fée hòy tîiwá wò</i> 3 4 5 6	<i>huunde ladde wurti, hey</i> 3 4 5 6
<i>taa róŋrúkù wò</i> 7 8 9	<i>taa (nde) ngata, hey.</i> 7 8 9
<i>nyàngòlà wò</i> 10 11	<i>Aynoowo, hey,</i> 10 11
<i>fèrdè gàngá sáw</i> 12 13 14	<i>maayel Ganga Saw.</i> 12 13 14

Hey, supervisor,
2 1

the monster in the bush has come out, hey.
3 4 5 6

(May it) not bite, hey.
7 8 9

Hey supervisor,
11 10

(it came out) at the small river in
12

Ganga Saw.
13 14

(Singer: Hammaadu Sarkiya)

3.

<i>fée hòy tíwá wò</i> 1 2 3 4	<i>Huunde ladde wurti, hey.</i> 1 2 3 4
<i>gún ndòh-rí</i> 5 6	<i>Kaddiikon,</i> 5 6
<i>nda nám bà</i> 7 8 9	<i>taa daanu.</i> 7 9 8
<i>máa-rí kà ddéré</i> 10 11 12	<i>Daadiraabe defi waccuufe.</i> 10 11 12
<i>vinyà ddéré-wà pát</i> 13 14 15	<i>(Kon) njabi waccuufe de pat.</i> 13 14 15

The monster in the bush came out, hey.

Circumcised boys,

don't sleep.

Mothers cooked tigernuts.

(The children) got all tigernuts

(Singer: Hammadu Sarkiya)

4.

<i>ì wó wóo, ì wóo wóo wóo</i> 1 2 3 4 5 6 7	<i>I wo woo, i woo woo woo!</i> 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
<i>ndòh bélé nám</i> 3 4 5	<i>Haddaago wo''inan waalaago.</i> 8 9 10
<i>ndòh-rí fángánt lée?</i> 11 12 13	<i>Haddoobe, ko mbi'on?</i> 11 12
<i>ndòh-rú wó,</i> 14 15	<i>Haddoobe duudbe, hey, (dum)</i> 14 15
<i>fée bélé nám lée</i> 16 17 18 19	<i>huunde woodnde e waalaago.</i> 16 17 18

Aye oh oh, aye oh oh oh,

circumcision makes lying down better.

Circumcised ones, what did you say?

(Circumcision) is something good for lying down.

(Singer: Abbo Sarkiya)

5.

<i>wóo vaa bánà</i>	<i>Aynoowo wolwan</i>
<i>vúyóo</i>	<i>jur jur.</i>
<i>ná'ée</i>	<i>Daada am,</i>
<i>yéeyè</i>	<i>yeeye.</i>
<i>wàavúu gáyyèràa</i>	<i>Ndaa koy haa do.</i>
<i>ná'ée yéeyè</i>	<i>Daada am, yeeye.</i>

The sperviser scolds

very much.

My mother,
 hey.
 Here are circumcised boys.
 My mother, hey.

(Singer: Abbo Sarkiya)

6.

<i>hórá bílà</i> 1 2	<i>Yúte har</i> 1 2
<i>kálà yèlwele</i> 3 4	<i>yaasi. Tampudo,</i> 3 4
<i>dáwnù máa</i> 5 6	<i>(Waddu) binnge! dewel dada</i> 5 6
<i>tíí páám</i> 7	<i>mo endi</i> 7
<i>bùk bùk lée</i> 8 9	<i>mawdi mawdi ban nii</i> 8 9
<i>bánjí mì ndúkó</i> 10 11 12	<i>haa mi meema (di).</i> 11 12

(There is) a fire
 outside. Weakling,
 (bring your) mother's daughter,
 with breasts
 as big as this,
 for me to touch (them).

(Singer: Abbo Sarkiya)

7.

<i>mì gà fé yàmí</i> 1 2 3 4	<i>Miin bee huunde am,</i> 1 2 3 4
<i>mì yá bè kànnú</i> 5 6 7 8	<i>dabbi haala dow may.</i> 6 7 8
<i>wóyà</i> 9	<i>Woyan,</i> 9
<i>iwóo yá bé kànnú</i> 10 11 12 13	<i>iwoo, (miin bee huunde am)</i> 10
	<i>dabbi haala dow may.</i> 11 12 13
<i>wóyà</i> 14	<i>Woyan,</i> 14
<i>fée kàñ nḡà nják</i> 15 16 17 18	<i>huunde besdugo habre.</i> 15 16 17 18

I and my thing
 looked for that reason.
 I'll cry
iwoo. (I and my thing) looked for that reason.
 I'll cry for the thing which augments fights.

(Singers: Abbo Sarkiya & Muusa)

8.

dàwá sòṅ páṅ
1 2 3

màa làk-mí
4 5

nàṅkúnàṅ lée
6 7

Only one monkey
3 2 1

ate up
4 5

much corn.
7 6

Waandu wooru tan
1 2 3

nyaami yam
5

butaali duuddi.
6 17

Note: This is a figurative expression. They say this sings of a girl who makes love with many men.

9.

káṅmó ndùwàṅ

Woy, kuttu daada maa.

mónnóo

A maayan hikka.

nómá vèrbúu

Weywey, kuttu daada maa.

wéy wéy

wey wey,

ndùwàṅ

kuttel

lémlém tōṅ tnní

peetel weli masin.

Cry, your mother's vulva.

You'll die this year.

Weywey,

your mother's vulva.

A small vulva is very good.

(Singers: Abbo Sarkiya & Muusa Kilaa)

Note: The lexical correspondence is not clear, but the singers gave me the translation of each word in Fulfulde.

10.

tà róṅrú wó
1 2 3

Taa ngatam, hey.
1 2 3

tà róṅrú wó

Taa ngatam, hey.

nyáṅgòlà wó
4 5

Aynoowo, hey.
4 5

tà róṅrú wó

Taa ngatam, hey.

èhée
6

Eehee,
6

nyáṅgòlà wó

Aynoowo, hey.

fée kàa taa
7 8 9

Huunde feere wurti (?).
7 8 9

nyáṅgòlà wó

Aynoowo, hey.

tá rógrú wó *taa ngatam, hey.*

nyánòlà wó *Aynoowo, hey.*

Don't bite me, hey.

Don't bite me, hey.

Supervisor, hey.

Don't bite me, hey.

Eehee,

supervisor, hey.

Don't bite me.

Another monster has come out.

Supervisor, hey.

Don't bite me, hey.

Supervisor, hey.

(Singer: Muusa Kilaa)

As was seen above, Songs 1, 2, 3, and 10 show the existence of a mystical creature called *fée mbáká*. The appearance of this monster is one of the characteristics of the Mbum songs that differs from the one in Diamaré prefecture. Song 4 tells of the usefulness of circumcision. Songs 5, 7, 9, and 10 reflect the building up of an intimate relationship through abusive expressions. At the same time, the elders tell the young novices their experience in the form of songs.

The appearance of some Fulfulde words in the songs, such as *taa* 'do not', *woya* 'to cry', indicate that Fulfulde worked deeply into the non-Fulbe community as a regional language.

The fact that these songs are used by both the Mbum and the Fulbe indicates the existence of close relationship between the two tribes. This fact suggest an approach to the study of the Adamawan community, which should be examined according to each cultural aspect.

Acknowledgement

I would like to extend my thanks to Belaka of Mbang Mbum who recieved me as a guest and offered many facilities; Galdima who lodged me in his *saare*; Hammadu Sarkiya, and Abbo Sarkiya who not only taught me their circumcision songs, but also helped me in many other ways; Muusa Kilaa, another informant; and to all the other Mbum villagers. Professor Shun'ya Hino, without whose cooperation this paper could not have been written, gave me a large amount of information about the society and cultural background of the Mbum. Finally, I would like to mention the hearty understanding given by Monsieur le Préfêt in Ngaoundéré towards our research in Adamawa.

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