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The Mafa belief system and its relevance in view of modernization

The Mafa – the most numerous of the ethnical groups in the Mandara Mountains of North Cameroon – count by guess about 500 000 people. They cultivate the terraced slopes with hoes. Their main food production is millet, peanuts, sesame and beans; and they raise goats and poultry – less frequently a bull for the traditional bull festival. The social order is strictly patriarchal: the earth and all that emerges from it belongs to the men, including the children, whom a mother is not allowed to take with her when she marries another husband in case of being divorced or having become a widow. About half the men have more than one wife. The women on average give birth to eight children of whom only 50 % reach the age of ten years. The head of family marries his daughters at the age of 15 to 17 to a candidate who pays a pride price consisting of goats and/or money. An ever increasing number of Mafa becomes either Christianized or Islamized. But the vast majority of people living in the mountains still practice their traditional religion: an ancestor and earth cult. More and more children got to school which will in the end bring the Mafa culture to a termination.

The traditional Mafa belief system comprehends essentially

- their relationship to the transcendental universe including the spirits and the deceased,
- their religious cults, i.e. ancestor worship, sacrifices to the sacred places in and around the compound as well as in their natural environment,
- their way of magic healing,
- and their concepts of sorcery.

Much has been written about all this.¹ I will therefore give here only some brief synopses.

1. The spirits

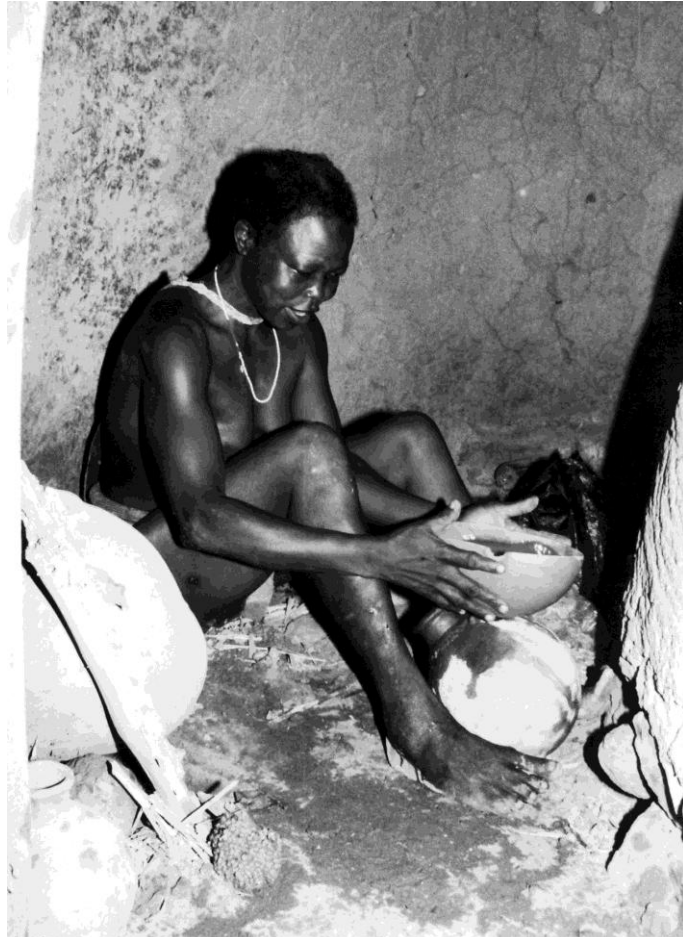
The Mafa cosmos is all over animated with spirits: They inhabit the sky, the earth and the underworld.

Zhiglè is the name for the sky as well as for the beings living there: they form a society with *bi zhiglè* as the chief who has his wife and children.² The sons and daughters of *be zhiglè* have the task to accompany the humans during their lifetimes. Everybody has such a “personal spirit” for whom they hold a special clay pot called *ged pats*. Once a year or, if in the event of

¹See for example Godula Kosack, *Die Mafa im Spiegel ihrer oralen Literatur. Eine Monographie aus der Sicht von Frauen* (Köln: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag, 2001), Chapters 8 & 9, and Godula Kosack, *MAGIE - die KRAFT zum Schaden oder zum GUTEN*, (Bad Schüsseneried: Gerhard Hess Verlag, 2012).

²The Mafa concept of *bi-zhiglè*, the chief of the *zhiglè* inhabiting the sky, has generally been misunderstood as a Supreme God. On the basis of this the Christian missionaries named their (only) God *bi zhiglè*. This implicit valuation has also been adopted and reinforced by many scientists. Thus van Santen writes of a „Supreme Being, God, called Jiglè“. José C.M. van Santen, *They leave their jars behind - the conversion of Mafa women to Islam* (Leiden: Centrum Vrouwen en Autonomie, Leiden, 1993), 120.

illness the divination recommends an offering to the personal *zhiglè*, the holder has to make a beer donation, begging for pardon if some failure has been diagnosed or has to ask for protection against attacks from other spirits or humans.



1. Woman offering to her ged pats.

Spirits called *zhiglè* (pl. *zhiglèhi*) also live on earth. The most important of them are:

zhiglè gai – the spiritual guardian of the homestead,

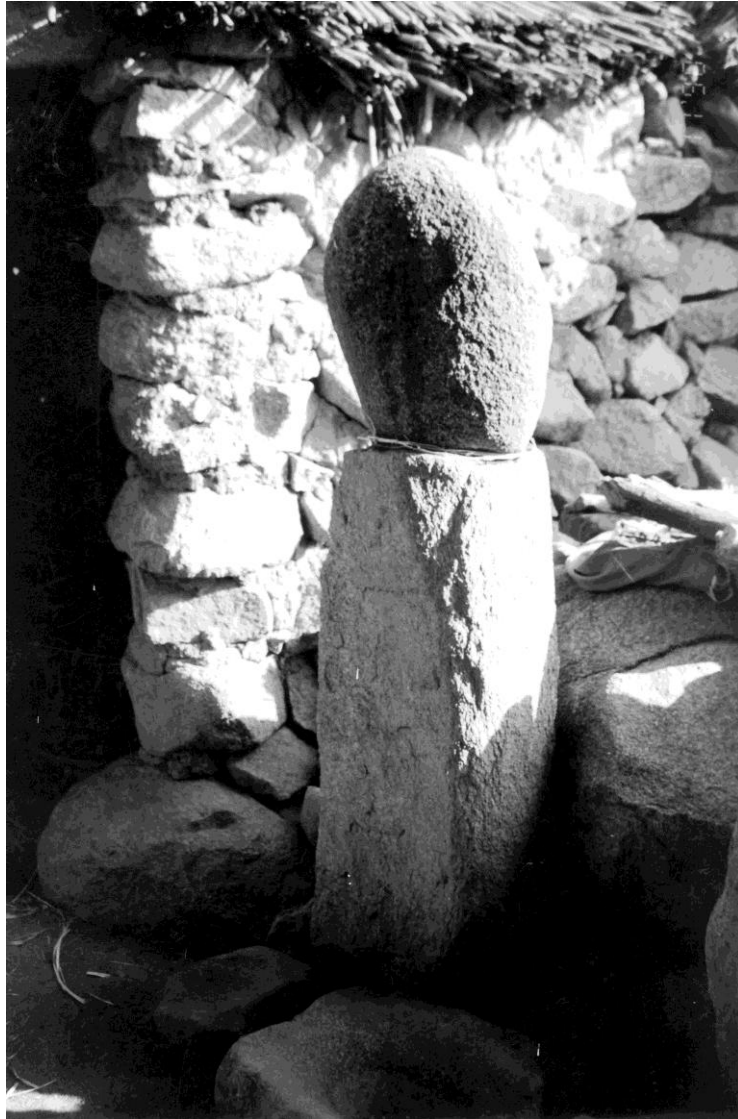
zhiglèveslèslè – is guarding the entrance of the home,

zhiglè var-ma-gai–is watching the yard in front of the compound,

zhiglè wuda - is supervising the outdoor space surrounding a family home,

zhigilé cived – is observing the path leading to a homestead.

There are also: *zhiglèhi* of the grinding stone, the animals, and of certain other shrines, usually in the shape of a stone erected in front of or inside the compound, which some house may have and others not.



2. Shrine for *zhigilè gai* at the entrance of a homestead

Another type of spirits are the *nihèd*. They live on earth as well as in the water. There is *nihèd gai* – guarding the house, *nihèd wuda* – responsible for the surroundings of a homestead, *nihèd yam* – living in the water.

The latter are the most important of the *nihèdhi* and also the most dangerous. They often make the rivers or dwells swell up and take people with them. Only after a sacrifice do they let the corpse free so that it can be properly buried.

All the various spirits have their representations in the compound or nearby, or in the fields, either in the form of a sacred clay pot or of a stone, or their dwelling is the *wof-ma-gai* (the tree of the house) or in special trees in the bush, in noticeable rock formations or in special

places. Each village quarter has its own sacred place, where the earth cult for the quarter is practiced, and there is a central one for the whole village. They are summits of the typical inselbergs with a grove on top, whose trees' branches may not be cut.

Picture: earth cult place

When asking for the difference between *zhiglèhi* and *nihèdhi* I was informed that they form different “societies” of spirits, which have more or less the same functions on earth. They may cooperate in guarding the humans or punish them, should they trespass the divine rules, such as not respecting that certain places do not have to be built upon or cultivated, or if the water or sacred place is contaminated by someone's indecent behaviour.

2. Religious cults

The Mafa, whose means of existence is the cultivation of millet and other field fruit, traditionally practice an “ancestor and earth cult”. They work on small terraced fields with hoes and raise poultry, goats and, to a lesser extent, sheep. The most distinguished heads of a family raise a bull for sacrificial purposes.

The year is structured corresponding to the rainfall and dry periods. The former, which is lasting four to five months, is completely charged with the necessary fieldwork. All types of obligatory ceremonies therefore take place in the dry season.

The most frequently performed religious act is the ancestor worship. The Mafa do not consider death as the end of somebody's life. Those who have lived before still exist in some place in the transcendental sphere. Each person is part of a stock of descendants: there are the forbearers in the *vevèd* (the cavern which is imagined underneath the earth), the ones now living and the progeny. There is a mutual dependency. Life in the *vevèd* may well be arduous; there is field labour and all work and hardship that exist on earth. The sacrifices offered to them by the living nourish them. It is thus understandable that the Mafa dread the possibility of dying without leaving a son behind. For only sons can feed them in the thereafter. Deceased without male descendants suffer more than those who regularly get their sacrifices. In addition, they are scoffed at by those who regularly get their offerings. This applies also to

people whose sons have become Christians and no longer perform those pagan cults. The ancestors in their turn protect their descendants from offences coming from other people or spirits. If they feel disregarded, they have means to remind the neglectful of his duties by sending illness or some other harm to him personally, or to his wives or children. Occasionally it is said that a person is the reincarnation of a forbearer, but this seems to have no specific relevance for the person concerned, and no specific obligation derives from this.



3. Ancestor worship in the compound's main round house *hudok*

The sacrifice to the ancestors is due, whenever there is a ceremony to any of the spiritual beings. But more often it is an accomplishment of its own. Whenever there is a personal or a social problem to be solved, at funerals, at all rituals addressed to the earth or the sacred places, the ancestors have to be communicated with. This is done by means of an oracle, most frequently performed by a divinator with the means of pebbles which he moves towards him between his legs. The central question always asked is, whether the ancestors are satisfied with their descendants' comportment or whether any of them demands some gift. Most often a beer offering is requested. The first woman of the house has to brew a good quantity of millet

beer. All the ancestor's descendants living in the querist's homestead have to be assembled and to participate in the ovation. A small quantity of the beer, served out of the ritual clay pot, is given to the earth while the head of the ceremony is addressing the respective ancestor, to whom the donation is dedicated, and they pray for his or her grace and blessings for all the family members. Then the calabash filled with beer is passed from one person to the next according to the genealogical age – children included.

The transformation of a dead person to becoming an ancestor is part of the funeral ceremony provided he or she has a son.³ A man becomes *baba* (the father), and a jar equally called *baba* is ordered for him at the potter. His father's pot, up to then the *baba* is being destroyed, and a bigger jug is produced for him called *bab-baba* (grandfather). The hitherto existing *bab-baba* also is broken, and no more sacrifices have to be brought to it. The great-grandfather is now supposed to be fully integrated in the *vevèd*, the underworld, where the ancestors dwell, so that the living need no longer nourish him. Neither has he any longer the potency to send illnesses or any other evils to his descendants. When a woman dies, a jar is made for her called *mama* (mother) or *mam-baba* (the father's mother), but she will only receive offerings as long as her son lives. There is no pot for the head of the family's grandmother.⁴

Some defunct will appear to a living person in a dream, inviting her or him to follow him into the cave. Often it is a husband who wants to be reunited with his wife or vice versa. He or she entices the spouse by describing the thereafter as a very nice place, where there are no needs any more. They tell that there are plenty of fields with excellent yields. The houses are said to be beautiful, no-one suffers from hunger or disease. Such dreams are much feared, as they may result in a person's death. Particularly if the person "visited" in this way accepts something to eat in the dream, for this means giving one's consent to follow someone into the grave. A person awaking from such a *sweven* is very unlikely to escape a quick death whatever he or she tries to do in order to prevent it.

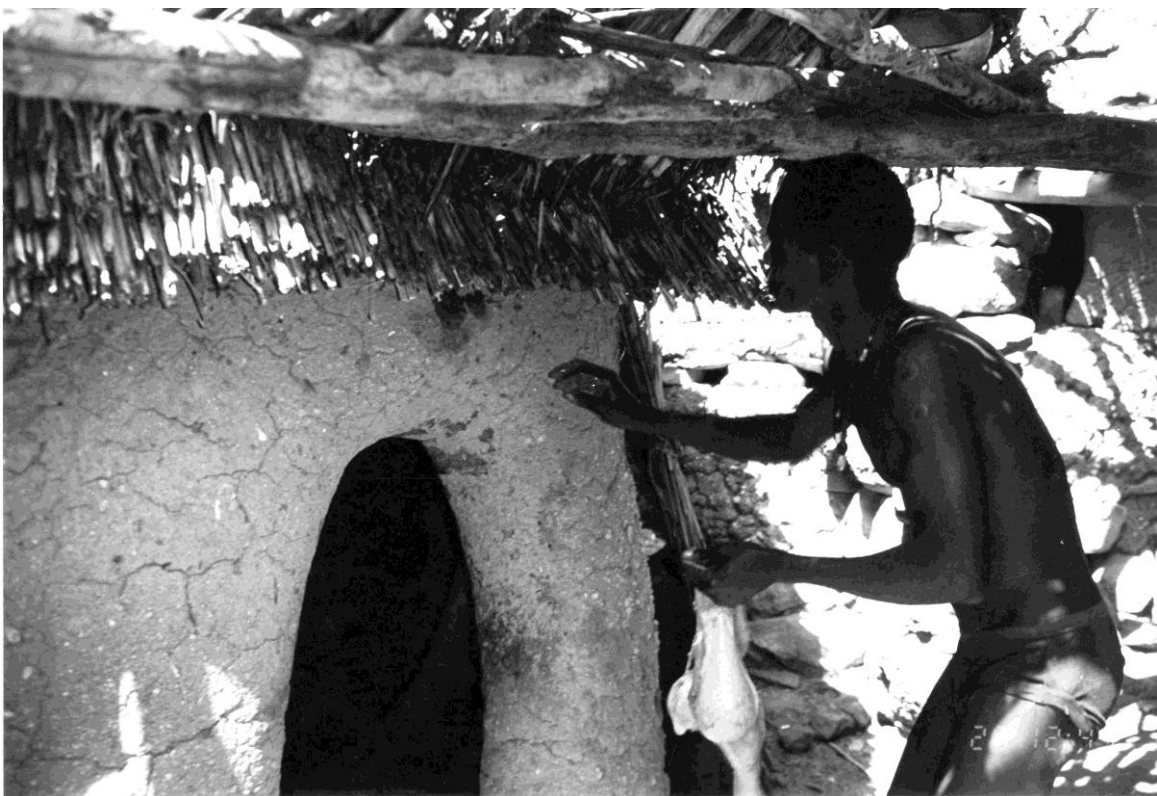
The Mafa year is accentuated by certain obligatory festivities. While during the rainy season only the most urgent ones can be performed – all what is necessary to bring a departed person under the earth, for example –, the obligatory ceremonies take place during the dry season, when the very intensive field work has been accomplished and when there is more leisure to

³ For details of the entire funeral procedure see: Kosack, *Die Mafa im Spiegel ihrer oralen Literatur*, 699-752.

⁴ For details of the shape and the meanings of the Mafa sacred pottery see: Gerhard Müller-Kosack, *Sakrale Töpfe der Mafa (Nordkamerun) und ihre kulturräumlichen Dimensionen*, in *Paideuma* 34, 1988, 91-118.

celebrate. These festival occasions require sacrifices to all the sacred places or spirit representations in and around the homestead. Once a year a sacrifice has to be brought to the earth cult place led by the village eldest in the presence of all the lineage eldest.

The first of the regularly recurring ritual feasts is celebrated after the harvest has been yielded in October. Called the *zom ngwar* (beer of the dry season) or *zom zhiglé* (beer of heaven), it normally takes place in November. The significance of it is to assemble the members of a minimal lineage at the home of the eldest of the respective lineage, in order to thank the heavenly spirits (*zhiglé*) as well as the ancestors for the successful harvest. A billy goat is sacrificed, in that the contents of the abomasums are flung on each of the ancestor pots held under the granary, above each entrance leading to the various round houses, onto the house altar, consisting either of a gathering of stones put on a slab next to the compound's entrance or of a large stone erected next to it, and also onto the holy tree of the house. Some bits of the intestines are put on a potsherd and are deposited on the way leading to the house for the spirit of the path. Following that, there is a beer ceremony in the compound's main round house, the *hudok*: Each member of the family is given the calabash filled with the ritual beer in order of their genealogical age.



4. Man flinging contents of the abomasums over the entrance of his homestead

The most important annual festival is the *ngolala* which has to be celebrated after the *zom ngwar* and before the new sowing. It is often interpreted as the “feast of the new year”. It usually takes part in February or March. Because of its central significance for the Mafa, the Christian missionaries use the term *ngolala* for Christmas, their most important annual feast. While the harvest feast is celebrated among the kinship group, the *ngolala* is celebrated in addition to this, structuring the village community. It has to be committed by the various villages in a certain sequence according to their settlement history.

The eldest of the various clans’ maximal lineages have to gather at the central assembly place for a palaver, in the course of which all the unresolved disagreements among the village population have to be cleared up. After long discussions a concluding divination on the earth cult place finds out, whether the ancestors consent to the beginning of the *ngolala*. If all this passes well, the traditional village chief is to announce the beginning of the festival after sunset. This is the signal for all households to put the millet into water, in order to let it germinate for the preparation of the festival beer. But before this can be done the next morning, each household head has to sleep with his wife who has the position of the wife of the *hudok* (main wife). Even if she lives elsewhere, he has to make her come back and spend the night with her. In a case I witnessed, the wife who was married to the very old brother of her late husband, refused to go to bed with him. The old man consulted the oracle: “My wife does not want to sleep with me. How can I perform the ceremony?” The answer was that he could put his club of the wood of *Ziziphus lotus*, which men usually carry with them as a defence weapon, on their body and declare it to be his wife. If by chance a wife menstruates, the head of family cannot join in the festivities but has to postpone them. This can also be the case, if the head of the household himself is absent at the time the *ngolala* is celebrated. It is sometimes caught up with as late as in July.

The day before the main sacrifice is performed, there is a family gathering in each compound including all the married daughters and their children who come from all the villages where they have married to. This is to demonstrate that the women, who in their husbands’ compounds remain “strangers” for all their lives, still belong to their families of origin. The main woman of the household prepares a special sauce consisting of sesame and a chicken, which the head of the household has killed by taking it by its head and turning it three times around

before throwing it on the floor. The feathers are not plucked but burnt in a fire. This meal is considered a blessing for the female descendants and their offspring.

Before the sun is rising the next day, the day of the actual *ngolala*, there has to be a beer and a chicken sacrifice in the round house *hudok*, where all ceremonies take place which are executed inside the compound. This is the day, when the whole village fetes. They meet in front of the compounds and beat the drums, dance and sing.

Every three years the Mafa celebrate the *marai*, the bull festival.⁵ It is the most challenging of their feasts. It is performed village by village in the order of their ranking. Within a village there is also an order of precedence: starting off with the traditional village chief and then following the sequence of the genealogical age of the heads of the families. Only “adult” men can participate as a bull holder, which means men who do not have a father any more. On the sixth day of a man’s funeral celebrations the eldest son is inaugurated as the new head of the family. Although the bull festival belongs to the Mafa tradition – as it does to all the other ethnical groups around –, the Mafa traditionally do not raise cattle. For the ritual a man has to buy a bull, usually from the cattle breeding Fulani. A bull means quite an investment. It is kept in a stable within the compound for up to three years, and once it is there, it will only be set free on the day of the celebrations. The sooner it is put into the stable, the longer it has to be fed and supplied with water, a rather tedious task high up in the mountains, where water becomes scarce in the dry season.

The actual ritual consists of having the bull in the stable liberated by the *bi gola* and after a short while (some minutes up to an hour) recaptured again. This is a dangerous task, as the bull may well be wild after such a long confinement. Each clan in the village has his representative among the *bi gola*, who have to protect themselves by wearing a large number of amulets. Yet, their office is much sought after. Every morning, before releasing the first bull of the day, they have to make a billy goat sacrifice in front of the bull’s shed, and they get the lion’s share of the meat. The village population stays outside the homestead, where the *bi gola* are performing their rituals in front of the bull’s stable, dancing to the music of iron flutes or drums. They also profit from the ritual beer which has to be prepared abundantly. After the bull is back in its stable, the *bi gola* proceed to the next compound where a bull is to be set

⁵For details see Godula Kosack, *MARAI, Experiencing the Mafa bull festival as a daughter of Huva*, DVD 50 min.

free, accompanied by the crowd. Depending on the number of participants, this may take several days up to a fortnight in each village.

The day after all the bulls of a village have been liberated and recaptured, all the bulls will be ritually slaughtered before sunset. The task of cutting their throats has to be performed by a neighbour, as the bull might be wrathful against his owner and revenge himself later. The head of family lays the bull's corpse in state in front of his stable, mourning and honouring him like a human, before he cuts him up and distributes the meat according to fixed rules among the relatives. The bull's meat is considered especially power-giving.

The origin and the meaning of the bull festival are uncertain.⁶ The people I interviewed emphasized the pleasure it gives to distribute meat abundantly. One informant compared it to a pilgrimage to Mecca: "The person who has sacrificed a bull joins the respected ancestors when he is buried. Others who die form their own group apart in the hereafter." To the Mafa the bull is much more than a domestic animal. The sacrifice of ten bulls is equivalent to the killing of a man. To kill someone in war used to increase a man's respect, as does making a *marai* sacrifice today. But it is dangerous, also for his descendants, because the spirits of dead men or bulls can seek revenge generations later, and bring ruin to the family. At the village earth shrine offerings are made every year to a *madzagai* (a special clay jug) for the whole village, in order to feed and placate the spirits of the men and bulls that have been killed. If those offerings to the *madzagai* are not made, anyone in the village may become sick and die. The parallel between the sacrifice of a bull and the death of a person is emphasized by the dancing that characterizes both festival and funeral. Cattle are perceived as bringers of culture. The bull is sacrificed so that his life force is transferred to humans. Its death is thus experienced as murder. A woman brings a person's body into the world; its life force comes from the man. The bull sacrifice increases the life force of those who take part. The *marai* represents the power of male fertility.

3. Health⁷

⁶The interpretation I present here is following the elaboration in the film Kosack, *Marai*.

⁷For more details refer to Godula Kosack, *The Mafa in Northern Cameroon*, in Christine E. Gottschalk-Batschkus und Joy C. Green (ed.): *Handbook of Ethnographies*, (München: Institut für Ethnomedizin, 2002), 183-196.

For the Mafa, health is the condition of harmony with the cosmos, i.e. with the spirits inhabiting the transcendental world and their ancestors. The spirits inhabiting the sky, the earth, the water, the roads, the rocks, the trees, and the houses are generally favourably-minded towards the people for whom they are responsible, and they protect them from attacks from other beings: humans or non-humans. Illness on the other hand is a sign of disorder in the cosmos directly surrounding a person. Only seldom can an illness be explained by exclusively one cause. If, for example, a person suffers from a long lasting bronchitis or severe malaria, a divinator is to be asked to find out the more deeply lying causes than just an infection or the transfer of parasites by mosquitoes. Being affected by an illness may have been caused by a sorcerer or by angry ancestors or spirits. By sending an illness, a spirit or an ancestor gives a hint to the family leaders who are responsible for the earth- and/or ancestor-offerings that some (more) sacrifice is due.

In order to regain a person's or a family's balance with the cosmos again, an illness must be treated in at least two ways: in the range of medicine with plants or mineral substances, and in the spiritual domain with sacrifices, evocations and devotions. The various approaches will strengthen each other mutually and are together effective in re-establishing the condition of health and wellbeing. It has to be noted that the head of a family may be reprimanded by his ancestors or some spirit by the illness of any member of his house. The divination which becomes necessary in cases of severe illnesses determines, which means have to be applied to let the patient regain his or her health. A traditional healer – this can be a woman or a man according to their special qualifications – usually combines a biomedical treatment with some magical act: providing amulets to be worn around the neck or hip or in the form of a bracelet; surrounding a person's head or feet or the whole body with animals' bones or feathers; putting some special stones or plants into the beer that is drunk during the healing procedure by all persons present.

4. Sorcery

According to the Mafa belief system, it is not only the ancestors and the spirits who can influence people's wellbeing, but danger may also lurk from some living persons. There is a concept of a special force called *wudimidè*, which is usually translated as "sorcery". *Ndi ndo* is

the expression for consuming someone: *ndi* means “eating” and *ndo* is the word for “man”. *Ndi mavar* is the translation for “eating a meal”, that means *ndi ndo* has to be understood as “eating a human”. According to several informants, six out of ten persons are born with *wudimidè*, with three of them making use of it in harming others, one person uses it for healing purposes or as a diviner, and two persons do not apply their force at all. This means that about 30 per cent of the whole population are suspected of practising the consumption of other people’s vital force. In the Mafa comprehension they practice some kind of cannibalism.

How does this go about? There are many different ways of realizing this. If someone is ill or if the children in the household die, if a woman does not become pregnant, if the animals die or become infertile, if the harvest is poor, although the neighbour’s crop is fine, if some family member has an accident, if the son does not find a wife, if the achievements at school suddenly deteriorate – if any calamity of that sort occurs, it is advised to ask a diviner for the reason. Most often the answer is that there is someone mischievous responsible for this. This may have happened in various ways: A person may have been touched by someone mischievous. In such case, the marred has a sudden sensation of coldness or of something prickling entering his body and spreading all over it. The person immediately feels weak. More often a malefactor gets hold of some substance containing some excretion of his victim (tissue with sweat or menstruation blood, finger or toenails, even excrements or urine). This “dirt” then is hidden either underneath the skin (the knee or the skull have been mentioned as such possible hiding places) or in a safe place below a terrace stone, for example. The evildoer then has a permanent grip on his prey: he “eats” of his vital force from time to time. When the respective person becomes too weak, he makes a break, so that the victim can recover, only to start consuming him after a while again. Other sorcerers leave their bodies at night like sleeping on their mat and fly in the shape of a light (round or oval, orange or yellowish according to their sex and mightiness) to their victims, in order to suck out their life force.

In order to be able to make use of one’s *wudimidè* (the potency to consume someone), the person has to have eaten “human flesh” for a first time. Most often a child, whose mother or father must be a sorcerer herself/himself, seduces him. The further consumption of other people’s vital force becomes compulsory. Once addicted, such a person is unable to stop “eating”

others or runs the risk of becoming ill himself or even dying. There are other sorcerers who cause illness and death out of envy, disfavour, competition or similar malice.⁸



5. Healer sucking some substance out of a boy's body which was inflicted upon him by sorcery

An illness caused by way of sorcery cannot be successfully treated by normal ways of healing. The only way of getting one's strength back is to order a counter-sorcery act. Some expert has to be called upon who has to be stronger than the sorcerer himself. His ceremony unconditionally has to end with the originator's death; otherwise he himself is liable to die.

Traditionally, the Mafa protect themselves and their children with amulets, fetishes or protecting plants in front of their homesteads, on the paths or in the fields etc. Christianized Mafa are not allowed to do this, for such acts are considered pagan. They "armour" themselves with their faith. Plating oneself against sorcery attacks is considered the most efficient means for all "enlightened" people who want to escape the spiral of violence and counter-violence on the transcendental level. The fact that this is deemed to be possible illustrates the Mafa con-

⁸ For the reasons given for the widespread practice of sorcery see Godula Kosack, *Wer verhext wen und warum? Erfahrungen mit Kraftbegabten in Nordkamerun*, in *Mitteilungen aus dem Museum für Völkerkunde Hamburg. Neue Folge Band 34*, 2004, 264-275.

cept of sorcery: It functions if there is a person willing to intrude into another person's vital body, and there has to be a recipient who is open for this. In the Mafa society individualism is not pronounced. The family obligations override all personal wishes. Sons become what their fathers were; daughters are bound to share their mothers' lot. They are married to a husband chosen by their parents. It is with the new epoch of formal school education that young people begin to become individuals and to write their own life-scripts.⁹ This reinforces their power to protect themselves against the attacks from any direction out of the other-world: from the spirits, the ancestors, or other humans.

5. The future of the Mafa belief system

In view of modernization the question arises what significance the Mafa belief system will have in future. Will the generations to come respect their ancestors' traditions? What does "tradition" mean to them? Will they continue to practice all the cults in all their complexity?

In the 1960s, the period immediately following independence, most of the few Mafa who had had the chance of studying and finding jobs in politics or in the administration denied their ethnic origin and passed off either as Mandara or as Fulani, according to the ethnic belonging of their tutors who had accommodated and financed them. Getting education then meant leaving their parents' homes, as there were no schools in the mountains. It was part of the deal that they had to become Moslems and break off contact with their "impure pagan" families. Only pupils at missionary schools were not coerced into abandoning their parents, although they, too, were admonished not to participate in "pagan" ceremonies any longer. Gradually, in the 1980s, some Mafa scholars bethought themselves of their peasant origin and wanted to make education and thus progress available for all children of their ethnic group. I have the public school of Guzda in mind, which Jean Gonondo, a graduate of a protestant missionary school, expanded, in the early 1980s, from a small, two-classroom building with about 100 pupils of all ages to a 14-class, well-functioning establishment of over a thousand disciples within five years. Later, in the new millennium, the educated young Mafa went a step further:

⁹This process has taken place in Europe at the period of the witch-hunt. See Godula Kosack, *Die Hexenverfolgung - Geburtshelferin des Individuums. Oder: Die Unterdrückung der mentalen Kraftbegabung als Voraussetzung für das moderne Weltbild*, in Katja Geisenhainer und Katharina Lange (ed.), *Bewegliche Horizonte. Festschrift für Bernhard Streck*, (Leipzig: Universitätsverlag, 2005), 309-317.

They developed a sense of pride towards their ethnic origins and aimed at seeing their parents' and their ancestors' culture upgraded.

Here is the example of Tevodai Mambai, son of a peasant, who visited the catholic missionary school in Guider. After having studied philosophy and obtaining a teacher's degree in Yaoundé, he presented a master thesis in German philology at Maroua University in 2013 which was entitled: "Die Modernisierung und Christianisierung – Segen oder Fluch für die Mafa?" (Modernization and Christianization – blessing or curse for the Mafa?) Although a practicing catholic, he was much concerned with the re-estimation and the conservation of the Mafa culture: its material as well as its immaterial elements. He also was concerned with the question, whether the young Mafa generation shared his interest in their culture of origin.

In 2012 he interviewed 110 young Mafa between the age of 11 and 16 in the Canton of Koza - 67 boys and 47 girls -, a mere random selection without any claim of representing the Mafa youth as such. With the exception of one boy all of the interviewees went to school. Mambai's object was to find out, what emphasis young people put on what he calls the "Mafa tradition", i.e. whether

- they are willing to pass on the ancestor cult with all its ceremonies to the next generation,
- they esteem traditional medicine,
- despite their being taught to read and write in French, they are willing to practise their mother tongue in writing.¹⁰

Mambai's topics are thus religion, traditional medicine and language. He specifies: "This has to be understood in view of the fact that modernization and Christianisation most often annihilate these fields."¹¹

Here are his findings:

Nearly a third of his sample (32 %) declared that they exclusively belonged to the traditional religion and nine more per cent said that they fluctuated between Christianity and ancestor worship. Only three boys among the respondents were Muslims. Although this means that

¹⁰Mambai, Tevodai: *Die Modernisierung und Christianisierung – Segen oder Fluch für die Mafa?* (Maroua: Master Thesis, 2013), 101.

¹¹Mambai, Tevodai: *Analyse der Feldarbeitsergebnisse, unpublished manuscript*: Maroua 2013

more than half of the young interviewees were Christians (56 %), I find the number of “traditional believers” relatively high considering the fact that all of them (with the exception of this one Muslim) went to school. It has to be noted that the great majority of teachers in the local primary and secondary schools are Christians. Muslim teachers would not accept to be employed in an area, where a large proportion of the population is “pagan”. The entire educational concept has been adopted from the former colonialists. Furthermore, the teachers, many of whom have passed either missionary schools or in any case schools which are designed to transfer Western values, are most likely to convey that being modern or progressive is not compatible with practicing the ancestor worship – even if this is not done consciously.

The reason the young Christians gave most frequently for having converted to their belief was that adepts to the traditional religion are charged with too many obligations. The ceremonies have all to be performed on ancestral ground. That means Mafa practicing their traditional religion cannot readily travel or live elsewhere, especially when they have inherited the responsibility for certain earth or ancestors’ cult actions. Many a Mafa living outside the Mafa territory is known to have become ill for having neglected such obligations. It is, however, surprising that 85 % of the Christianized youngsters intend to continue participating in the family cult actions whenever they are at home.

As elaborated above, the Mafa assume that about a third of the population is practicing sorcery. Everybody among the interviewees has had his experience with it directly or indirectly, and many precautions (ceremonies, amulets, plants growing in front of the house, altars etc.) are taken to protect themselves from it. They generally live to see that academic medicine does not have any means to treat those “invisible” illnesses, once a person has become a victim of them. However, 50 % of the converted respondents consider Christianity to be a more effective protection against sorcerer’s attacks than the traditional amulets or counter-sorcery acts.

A third reason given for favouring Christianity is the fact that it pulls down the barrier between *gwalda* and *vavai*, i.e. between the peasant majority (about 96 to 97 % of the population) and the endogamous minority group of the disesteemed morticians who also fulfil the tasks of blacksmiths and potters, of diviners, of traditional healers, and of obstetrics. Because of the part they play at burials – sewing the body into goats’ furs or a bull’s skin and afterwards eating the meat of the ritual animals – they are considered impure. In the tradi-

tional Mafa society *gwalda* and *vavai* are not allowed to share a calabash or an eating bowl, and above all to intermarry with *vavai*. Many of the young people – although far from all – welcome the abolishment of this segregation.

When speaking of the conversion to Christianity, one must distinguish between the various confessions. While the Protestants, and above all the Adventists, teach their adepts to keep away from all “pagan” practices, the Catholics differentiate between actions their adepts mustn’t participate in and those in which Catholics may well take part. In 2011 the “Comité de Liturgie” of the Diocese Maroua-Mokolo made an opinion poll among priests and deacons, whether they thought that Catholics may fully attend all rites of the bull festival or not. The respondents fully appreciated the function of the bull-festival as uniting the village population in a similar way as the communion unifies the Catholic congregation. Dancing, eating and drinking were accepted by most of them. Others maintained that Catholics must not eat the bull’s meat, as the killing is performed in a “sacrificial” manner.¹²

The Mafa belief system is abating rapidly. Whereas, for example, in 2003 there were 15 heads of family celebrating the bull festival in the village of Houva, there were only three of them in 2012, and – it was stated – the ritual wouldn’t be performed anymore with all the details required in earlier times. Many young Mafa being conscious of this nowadays make efforts to safeguard their “tradition”.

Ditsuma (tradition) is the name of a cultural forum which organizes cultural festivals - with Mafa dances, music, recital of proverbs and stories – and which organizes the teaching of reading and writing in the Mafa language. The *Ditsuma* members also intend to organize the instruction of traditional rituals and ceremonies, since a large number of youth is no longer taught them by their parents. This way the *Ditsuma* forum tries to enhance the status of the Mafa cultural identity. However, it cannot be imagined that “modern” thinking Mafa, who are educated according to Western standards and as a consequence Christianised, will continue to perform all the ritual acts that their parents still exercise. They may be taught the knowledge of how to conduct the ancestor worship, they may be acquainted with performing sacrificial acts aimed at pacifying the house- or the field spirits, they may have the proficiency of all the sequences composing the religious feasts, but they will not be willing to observe all the re-

¹² Robert Djabou, *Compendium des réponses données par les CEV suite à l’enquête sur la fête de taureau*, (Kouza: unpublished paper, 2011).

stricting rules and taboos which are part of the Mafa-belief system. Many old people are aware of this and appreciate the ethnographic work as a means of guarding many details of their cultural acts for the future generations. But they do not think that their grandchildren will continue to exercise the Mafa religion. What they hope for is that they and their ancestors will not be forgotten with all the efforts they made to cultivate the land and to maintain its ecological order.

Let me quote the conclusions of Mambai's evaluation:

„The young Mafa are on their way. Most of them do not know which direction to take. They want to enjoy the comfort of an emancipated life and, at the same time, respect their tradition. As there is no institution which safeguards the Mafa traditional faith, as modernism and Christianity rapidly changes the Mafa society, the future of the Mafa tradition lies in the dark.”¹³

And – it has to be added - in view of the Boko Haram threat it lies so much more in the gloom.

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¹³Mambai, *Analyse der Felddergergebnisse* (Maroua: unpublished manuscript), 4.