

Authority, Witchcraft, and Change in Old Moghamo (Cameroon)

Suppression of the Sasswood Ordeal, 1924-25, and Its Consequences

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Abstract. – There are 28 Moghamo-speaking villages with more than 50,000 people in the North West Province of the Republic of Cameroon. In the mid-19th century many segmented Moghamo lineage groups were moving towards consolidation. In the process leadership co-opted the sasswood poison ordeal to protect their communities against witchcraft anxiety. With the penetration of colonialism the economic and political autonomy of local authority waned. The ritual ordeal took on symbolic importance. When it was suppressed in 1924 and 1925 old leadership lost a mechanism against witchcraft and also autonomy in ritual responsibility. From that time the secularization of local authority was accelerated. Some leaders participated in the colonial order to their benefit but the Old Moghamo was radically changed. New wealth, the search for methods of witchcraft control, education, Christianity, and a Native Court and Authority brought about a New Moghamo by 1940. [*West Africa, Cameroon, Old Moghamo, witchcraft (ezek), sasswood poison ordeal (goog)*]

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During field research in 1984 for a history of the Moghamo aged informants often revealed their lifelong anxiety over the power of *ezek* (witchcraft). A few remembered a control technique used by village-heads until the mid 1920s: *goog*, the ritual sasswood poison ordeal.

Based on that research I argued that the *goog* ordeal had been considered the most effective mechanism for the control of witchcraft by the pre-eminent Moghamo lineage heads and was a pillar of Old Moghamo authority until its suppression by the British administration in 1924. From the perspective of local informants the radical reduction in the power of Moghamo leadership and changes in Moghamo society that followed were symbolized by *goog*'s demise. Therefore I juxtaposed Old and New Moghamo in terms of

the secularization of local authority with the *goog* suppression as the pivotal event (O'Neil 1987).

This paper aims to introduce the Moghamo, provide a background of their cosmology and cultural belief, and describe the *goog* ordeal, its suppression and consequences for local society until around 1940.

1. Moghamo

The homeland of the Moghamo is a transitional zone between the forests of the upper Cross River basin and the Bamenda Grassfields of North West Cameroon. A formidable natural barrier divides these two geographical areas. Eastwards from the Momo River a crescent shaped escarpment, at times more than a thousand feet high, appears like a fifteen mile breakwater assaulted by a rolling sea of wild palms and hardwoods (Ngwa 1989: 114).

Scattered throughout the hilly, forested country to the south and west of Moghamo are settlements of the Upper Banyang, Betieku, and Ambelle peoples. Rivers and streams of the Moghamo heights fall into this basin and eventually reach the Cross River (see Ruel 1969: 1 f.).

A small number of Moghamo villages clustered around Widekum and its market seem to be thrust into the forest and foreign to its environment. They are at the base of the main approach to the Grassfields and Upper Moghamo villages. For generations the market has been an inland port for a passageway between forest and grassfields. Through it, and several others of minor importance, founding communities have migrated and a regional exchange has flourished. Efik and Duala agents, followed by successive German and English traders and administrators, have toiled up and down the boulder strewn paths of its slopes (Warnier 1975: 301 f.).

The Moghamo paths ascend the steep escarpment passageways until the forest umbrella abrupt-