



“Crying the Death”

Rituals of Death among the Yamba (Cameroon)

Hermann Gufler

Abstract. – The article gives a detailed description of the Yamba mortuary cycle, the main purpose of which is to dismiss the dead peacefully and to cleanse the pollution of death. Yamba funeral ceremonies mirror the stark egalitarianism of Yamba society. In terms of ritual performance all deaths, except those of small children, chiefs, and some important ritual office holders, are treated alike. Although some changes have taken place over the last fifty years, the most important being the postponement of death celebrations for up to a year or more, most of the rites are still performed today. While formerly people were buried in communal graves, nowadays the dead are buried in single graves. This “individualising tendency” is closely connected with the influence of Christianity. But there are no indications that delayed death celebrations have an effect on the condition of the dead or change their status. [Cameroon, western Grassfields, Yamba, death, funeral rites and ceremonies]

Hermann Gufler, Mill Hill Missionary in Cameroon since 1967, has been working in the western Grassfields and since 1985 in Sabongari parish which includes the Yamba area; he has published several articles on the Yamba (see References Cited).

For the Yamba,¹ the ideal of a good life is to live to a ripe old age, bear many children, see one's children's children, and be held in general respect. But few people attain this ideal. Infant mortality was very high in the past, sometimes up to fifty per cent, and is still high today. Many people die young. Serious illness and death are generally not ascribed to “natural” causes. Even the death of an old person is often suspected by close relatives to have been caused by mystical or superhuman agents. There exists among the Yamba what amounts to an almost obsessional

desire to find out the cause of death. Yamba fear that if they do not know the cause of somebody's death, other deaths may follow. The cause has to be discovered and appropriate measures taken to eliminate further deaths.

To a casual observer it might seem that witchcraft is the foremost cause of serious illness and premature death among the Yamba. This is not the case. It is the task of the diviners to reveal the mystical agents responsible for the affliction and how to prevent further affliction. In the final analysis, serious illness and death are always symptoms of social conflict. That is why Yamba are particularly vexed if a death happens suddenly because it leaves them no opportunity to discover the cause of the sickness through divination and to “judge the case,” i.e., to remedy the situation and avoid the death of the afflicted.

The list of causes is a long one and one can detect a certain preference for some causes for different age-groups or categories of people. I give here the most common ones:

- a) The death of babies and small children is invariably attributed to cannibal witchcraft (*rum*), but it may also be caused by the anger of in-laws, even in-laws “of behind,” adultery of

¹ For historical and ethnographic information on the Yamba see the works of Migeod (1925), Gebauer (1964), Chilver and Kaberry (1967), Jikong (1979), Buinda (1987), Moss (n.d.), Gufler (1995a, 1995b, 1995c, 1996a, 1996b, 1997, 1999), and also the reports by British colonial administrators, Hawkesworth (1923), Gorges (1932), Carpenter (1933), and Newton (1936).