

Since I started my research into Yamba customs and way of life, they have been my most trusted and reliable informants of Yamba culture. After having observed a burial or one of the many funerary rites, I conducted in-depth interviews with my informants. We discussed the symbolism of the different rites but also the changes which have taken place over the last fifty years. All our interviews were conducted in Pidgin English, the lingua franca of the former West Cameroon, of which they had an excellent command, and without the help of an interpreter. But there were many other older Yamba people with whom I cross-checked the information given to me and who also supplied valuable information.

## 1 Pre-Burial Rites

### 1.1 Wa kpɛ – Wailing Death

When somebody dies, the women start wailing and weeping. They fall on the corpse holding and hugging it and trying to raise it up.<sup>3</sup> The death drum (*ncum kpɛ*) is beaten. The death cry (*ɲguɲ*) is taken up by all the people in the vicinity.<sup>4</sup> It is like a summons to all people of the hamlet to come to the death compound. The wailing is especially dolorous for small children and even hysterical when young people die. After some time the lineage head will tell the women to stop crying and get ready for the people who will be arriving for the wake (*rɛ kpɛ* or *noɲ kpɛ*) and the burial. The women will go to their stores or farms to bring food, while men bring firewood for the *mis kpɛ* (fire death) which will be lit in the centre of the yard during the night and arrange for a supply of palm wine. An envoy is sent to the *tɛ'tsə* (MF/MB, the matrikin) of the deceased to inform him of the death. For a man's death they take his bag along, if a woman dies her basket is brought to him. Any old bag or basket will do.

A bamboo structure (*ntəɲ*) is erected in a shady place of the main yard to which the corpse, after

it has been washed, is tied. Lineage heads and old people are put in a sitting position up on the *ntəɲ*, young people in a standing position. A man's personal possessions such as his war shield, gun, cutlass, iron rattles (*njaɲ*), wicker rattles (*mbak*), and bag are hung on or placed near the *ntəɲ*. A spear is tied to his hand. For a woman, her basket containing her personal belongings is put either on her back or next to the bamboo structure together with her hoe. Some poles are stuck in the ground around the *ntəɲ* and a blanket or some cloth draped around it. People coming to the death compound would go straight to the *ntəɲ*, open the blanket, and look at the corpse. According to Pa Monday Kongnjo, one has to see the dead person before tears come to one's eyes. "The reason why Yamba tied the corpse to the *ntəɲ*," he said, "was to allow people to have a last look at the deceased. If you don't see the dead person, tears won't come to your eyes. You must see him before memories come back to your mind: 'Yes, this is the man! We walked together. He came to my bush kitchen to greet me any time. Why did he have to die?' Then you start crying."

There was a common belief among the Yamba that when a corpse is tied to the *ntəɲ*, one won't see its shadow (*ma-lulɛi*, *ma-tsəntsən*) if the person has really died (see Gufler 1999). Moss (n.d.: 48) reports from Mbem, apparently independently, that "should there be shadow, the people would say that the spirit has not left the body, and some would say that the spirit was being judged if the shadow showed on the ground."

The colonial government forbade the common practice of exposing the dead on a bamboo structure but in more distant villages of Yamba it was still practised in the 1960s. The reason for outlawing this practice was most probably sanitary. I was told that in some cases, for example if an important man died, the corpse was left on the *ntəɲ* for several days to allow people from far away to attend the funeral. People would then stuff their noses with cotton or leaves because of the stench coming from the decomposing corpse.

### 1.2 Ma' sɛ' kpɛ (Gom Dialect), ma' nsɛs (Mfe Dialect)

As soon as the corpse is tied to the *ntəɲ*, the women of the descent group, especially the deceased's mother, sisters, wife or wives, and daughters, bring raw groundnuts, cocoyams, and corn, and throw them at the foot of the *ntəɲ*. This is called *ma' sɛ' kpɛ*. One informant told me that by this action the

3. Pregnant women may look at a corpse but may not touch it. Physical contact with a corpse is believed to harm the child in the womb. But there is no injunction against pregnant women being present at the burial.

4. Gunshots are not part of the funerary practices in Yamba as is reported from other Grassfields communities (Jindra 1997). Death was announced by the death cry (*ɲguɲ*) and the beating of the death drum (*ncum kpɛ*). Nowadays one can occasionally hear gunshots at delayed death celebrations. But this is an innovation introduced by Yamba living outside their native villages.