



RURAL/TEA VIRTANEN

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THE ONE WHO HAS NOT EATEN CANNOT PRAY

TIGHTROPING BETWEEN WORDLY AND SPIRITUAL WELL-BEING IN RURAL CAMEROON

In the last fifteen years thousands of Mbororo pastoralists from different parts of Cameroon have joined *Tijaniyya*, an Islamic Sufi order that has spread from Senegal. One of them, Umaru, has witnessed the birth and expansion of a locally notable *Tijaniyya* community where dozens of Mbororo households have moved. While the neighbourhood is well-suited to religious pursuits, a more difficult task is satisfying the necessities of everyday life.

ONE RAINY AFTERNOON in October 2010 I was chatting with Umaru, a former cattle herder in his fifties, in a Muslim neighbourhood, Naanawa, located on a main road crossing the Adamaoua Region of Cameroon.

– There are two obligatory things in the world, Umaru reasoned, as our talk turned to the challenges that he and his neighbours face in their everyday life.

– The first is between you and God, what God expects from you.

By this, Umaru was referring to a variety of performances for which one can look for divine recompense. The other, more mundane necessity, he added, is to see to one's occupation. With the money earned, one can, for instance, help one's children and other relatives in cases of illness.

Among the Mbororo pastoralists of rural Cameroon, the two necessities have traditionally been handled by means of cattle. Beasts have been slaughtered and the meat distributed as Islamic alms. Through cattle sales, many pastoralists have been able to undertake a pilgrimage to Mecca. Animal sacrifices have confirmed marriages and incorporated newborn children into the kin group and Muslim community. Meat and milk products have formed an important part of the human diet, and cattle and milk sales have provided cash to buy supplementary foodstuffs and other goods.

FOR MANY MBORORO, all of that is still true, but there are also those whose beasts are too few to be regularly sold or slaughtered, or for whom possessing herds is but a memory. Occasional cattle epidemics or fatal thunderstorms have wiped out whole herds, and the worsened economic situation has forced many to sell more and more animals in order to maintain their families. For those with no cattle left, there are two choices: to stay in the bush and try to cope by farming, or to search for other means of livelihood in villages and towns.

The choice by Umaru's family, as well as some 60 other Mbororo households, has been to follow their spiritual guide, Sheikh Ibrahim, a *Tijaniyya* teacher from the East Region who settled in Naanawa in 1990s. For these people, earning a living has not been the first priority in choosing their present residence.

MORE IMPORTANT has been the aspiration to lead a pious life. For this purpose, the blessed presence of the sheikh, religious instruction carried far through loudspeakers, as well as the daily worship routines on the common prayer ground provide favourable conditions.

Moving to Naanawa has also intensified everyday sociality



PHOTOS: TEA VIRTANEN



Men gathered on the prayer ground for Friday sunset prayers.



Little girls playing in front of the mosque under construction.



among relatives – and between lineage groups that had before lived scattered throughout the Cameroonian savannah – and provided community members with a specific sense of religious and cultural belonging. To Umaru’s mind, Sheikh Ibrahim’s community is an exceptional place for fulfilling one’s obligations towards God. Diverse tasks performed for the sheikh and his family are considered good deeds, through which, in Umaru’s words, “one looks for blessing”.

– There is no other place better for that. If you live here, you do that one job, there is no greater concern, he affirms.

MUCH TRICKIER IS the task of satisfying the material necessities. How to feed the family day by day? How to provide clothes, or pay for medication? People try to meet the daily challenges by engaging in various activities. Those engaged in cattle trade, although few, do better than those who struggle along by cultivating their little plots, or providing religious and herbal healing services. Moreover, many Koranic students are materially dependent on the rest of the community, or relatives living elsewhere.

The dilemmas of everyday life are also met through prayer

and by cultivating endurance. A good deal of reciprocity is also needed. Before sunset, there is a constant traffic between housing compounds as children are sent to borrow the missing ingredients for supper, and to return things borrowed earlier. Hard choices cannot always be escaped. Some children are forced to leave school because of their parents’ inability to pay school fees.

Umaru is confident of the righteousness of the spiritual path he has chosen in moving to Naanawa. Now he tries to find cash for a licence that would prove his professional skills as a traditional healer and thus help him find potential clients and earn money.

– One looks for both of these things, they cannot be separated, he reminds me of the two necessities of life, and then concludes: the one who has not eaten cannot pray.

Our conversation is interrupted by the imam’s meditative prayer call. Time for Umaru to hasten to the sunset prayers. ■

All names mentioned in this article, of individuals and of the neighbourhood where they live, have been in changed to protect the identity of the people interviewed.