

NOTES ON THE ESIMBI OF WUM DIVISION

by P. C. MAFIAMBÁ

These headstrong people on Cameroon's western frontier deserve far more attention than has so far been given them. In Wum Division, where they are found, they form quite a distinct ethnic group and they easily excite the interest of any visitor with their near nudity and quaint dress. The women put on a raffia skirt, while the men drape a towel around their waists and frequently sport dane guns, for the principal occupation of the Esimbi man is hunting.

Esimbi-land is nearly double the area shown on English maps. It includes such places as Itiakú, Itineneng and Metazu, among others, which the English show as being in the Aghem clan area (the Aghem are shut off on the west from the border by the Esimbi and the Esu peoples).

Although the Esimbi are a topic of wry jokes among other inhabitants of Wum Division, yet they are an intelligent people. Moreover, the Esimbi are celebrated for the heroic and sustained armed struggle which they led against the Kaiser's Empire-builders.

Authentic Cameroonians

Contrary to what people have been led to believe, the Esimbi are not of Nigerian origin nor are they related in any way to the Tiv (Munchi) of the adjoining Nigerian Province of Benue. The authentic history of the Esimbi as collected and cross-checked among the Esimbi elders by the author is as follows:

The Esimbi came from Widekum, the source of many ethnic groups of West Cameroon. The customs of the Esimbi are similar to those of Widekum but the languages are now different. The Esimbi never had anything to do with the Tiv (as it has been asserted), and only proximity on the Cameroon-Nigeria frontier has enabled a few Esimbi — as happens in all frontier regions in the world — to learn the Tiv languages. The Esimbi look east, not west, and the chiefs and other leading people are beginning to



wear the flowing Bali gowns and caps worn by the Tikar-descended Grasslanders of West Cameroon.

Early History

Before the Germans arrived, all Esimbi resided in the old town called Ikuru, occupying a chain of three hills in the heart of the Esimbi country on the left bank of the Meitchem River. The Esimbi cannot place the time they left Widekum or the length of their stay in Ikuru; but this might have been some two hundred years ago. The late Chief Wachong Kum Ana, who died in his eighties in Wum on 4th of March 1962, was born there and grew up there. Even at that time the Esimbi settlement at Ikuru was said to have been fairly old. All the Esimbi lived together at Ikuru for reasons of security against attacks from their neighbours, the most prominent of whom were the Aghem. All Esimbi paid tribute to Aghem in palm oil, animals killed in hunting, and honey. Each Esimbi household contributed its share of palm oil which the Aghem, a Grassland people with no palm oil, collected and still carry in long cylindrical wooden drums. When the Esimbi were tardy in paying tribute, the Aghem would wage war, Waindo Down (Wum) being one of the last Aghem sub-clan groups to do so. Before the German Government stepped in to prohibit this custom, the Esimbi for their part also waged war and oppressed some of their neighbours, particularly the Mubadji, a Ngemba offshoot in Wum Division.

The late Chief Wachong stated that in the days before European rule the Esimbi were a powerful people who waged constant war against their nearest neighbours, the Mubadji. The defeated Mubadji were carried off and sold into slavery probably in the Tiv country of the Benue valley in exchange for guns which the Esimbi did not make. (These guns probably came from the factories of the British Royal Niger Company on the Banue). One of the Esimbi-Mubadji wars is particularly celebrated in the Esimbi annals: the battle of Bufi.

The Battle of Bufi

As the story goes, a large number of Babadji people had passed through the heart of Esimbi-land and established a camp at Bufi, not far from the Cameroon-Nigeria Border. There the Babadji were profitably hunting wild pigs. This angered the Esimbi,

In the ensuing battle the Esimbi Chief of Benabinge turned into an elephant and nearly trampled down all the Babadji. Thereupon the Babadji gave as tribute to Benabinge a celebrated beauty named Yaakpe, of Menka (Mamfe) origin, whom they had captured in their wars against other neighbours. The long standing bad blood thus existing between the Babadji and the Esimbi was exploited to the full by the Germans in the heyday of their empire-building.

Resistance against the Germans

The late Chief Wachong stated, — and this is corroborated by other accounts — that the Germans entered Esimbi-land through Mubadji, whose inhabitants guided the probing Germans into the land of their constant foes, the Esimbi. When the Germans arrived in Esimbi country they invited all the Esimbi to come together and to be friends with the European intruders. The Esimbi, however, refused to accept the olive branch proffered by the Germans and further refused to pay tax. The Germans thereupon established a military post at Ikuru with a detachment of black troops commanded by a German officer, for the purpose of subjugating the Esimbi. This has left the Esimbi with a bitter memory of the German colonialists, for the Germans waged merciless wars of attrition in which a great number of Esimbi people were killed, nearly wiping out the Esimbi clan.

The Esimbi-German conflict came to a head as follows: The Esimbi indicated by pantomime gesticulations that they knew where wild pigs were to be found in large numbers. Thereupon they led the German officers in ones and twos where the pigs were supposed to be found. On the way the Germans were given surprise attacks by superior numbers of Esimbi who killed them and threw their bodies on a hilly site near Ikuru. Only one German woman jumped through the window and escaped to Bamenda where she gave an account of the catastrophe.

Her suspicions had been aroused when the men were continuously being led away without the first persons returning. As happened in the Anyang sacking of Ossidinge (Agbokem) in 1904, German indignation knew no bounds. They gathered a large army of Babadji and Bafut peoples and together settled old scores against the Esimbi.

Dispersal of the Esimbi Clan

It is from the time of the Esimbi - German war that the Esimbi dispersed from Ikuru and scattered in all directions, founding new settlements in the fastnesses of Esimbi-land : Benakuma, Benabinge Benange, Iliaku, Ilineneng, Benatidi, etc.

The people of Benakuma (the court seat), Benabinge (Benakuma II), and Benange (Benakuma III) are from one family, having come from Benakuma I (which includes Kedingene, the seat of the paramount chief of all Esimbi). Ilineneng, Badu, Bakpu have also Benakuma people. The Benatidi and Benagudi are of one family, the Benatidi having come from Benagudi. The Benahundu, Benade (Atenge) and Bubi are also of one family. The dispersal of the Esimbi to the frontier region with Nigeria has occurred in very modern times. This, therefore, discredits the view that the Esimbi are of Nigerian origin.

World War I

The Esimbi settled accounts with the Germans during the First World War. After English troops had entered the Esimbi area from two directions, the Esimbi people, who had never wholly given up their armed struggles against the Germans, who after the Ikuru massacre had established a permanent military outpost at Benade, engaged the German troops from the rear and killed the German officer stationed in Benakuma. (It is said that the German officer was skinned and his skin used as cover for a drum. I found the Esimbi rather reluctant to talk about this subject). After that, the Esimbi turned over to the English the German guns which they had captured and started co-operating with the English Government by paying tax.

The Esimbi Chieftancy

A partial genealogy of the Esimbi Paramount Chiefs is as follows:

1. Kum Ana.
2. Nkudi-Kum Ana (alias Wakumo Wohinjo or Old Chief); He was the son of Kum Ana and Chief at the time of the arrival of the Germans. He is celebrated in Esimbi-land for the armed resistance which he led against the Germans.

3. Wachong-Kum Ana. Brother of Nkudi-Kum Ana who succeeded because his brothers' children were too young. He died on 4th March 1962 at the ripe old age of about 84 years. He saw four eras - free Esimbi-land, German rule, British rule, and free Cameroon.

4. Aza-Wachong. Son of Wachong-Kum Ana is the young intelligent but illiterate incumbent of the Esimbi throne

Succession to Esimbi Throne

This is strictly in accordance with tradition. The late Chief Wachong I of Benakuma stated that he was appointed Chief by his late father before the arrival of the Germans. He stated that it is the custom that when the Esimbi Chief feels the end is near, he brings drink and calls all the important people to assemble; he then publicly names one of his sons as his successor. The clan does not disobey the edict of the Chief. The contention of the late Chief Wachong I that the late chief's nominee is accepted without question by the whole clan was vigorously upheld by his half brother, the Regent Kum thimbru and other elders. Never, they assert, has the Chief's nomination been called to question or nullified by the Regency Council. Attempts to bypass the nominee of the late Chief Wachong I and install a literate son on the throne met with the active opposition of the Esimbi elders and failed.

The Chief of Benakuma (Kedingne) is and has always been the acknowledged supreme ruler of all Esimbi. His word is law. Some places like Ilineneng have no chief and others like Benatide and Benagudi have got small chiefs who are merely tax-collectors. All Esimbi, no matter their rank or status, accept without question the authority of the chief of Benakuma (Kedingne).

The late Chief Wachong Ana was a powerful figure and much feared by all the Esimbi people. He told the writer (in March 1962) that his people paid tax because they feared him. « Wait till I die », he said, « and you will see how stubborn they are ». The chief knew his people well. Because of their stubbornness, the business of tax collection among the Esimbi has always been delicate and not a few civil servants, in the thinly administered area of Esimbi-land, have lost their lives in the execution of their duties. The introduction of the C.F.A. franc into West Cameroon in 1962 met with considerable resistance from the Esimbi; they flatly refused to accept anything other than the starting (Nigerian) currency

they had known. To make their determination firmer, they stopped trading in the important entrepôt market of Mbelliarig. The young chief himself was unhelpful; when called upon to set an example, he stated flatly that he had no money to change.

INSTALLATION OF A NEW CHIEF

The Interregnum

Two native weeks (sixteen days) pass between the death of a chief and the installation of his successor. The death of the chief is communicated to the surrounding villages by the talking drums. The funeral ceremonies are divided into two parts. In the first eight days there is real mourning devoid of merriment. There is dancing and firing of guns, but this is ceremonial mournful dancing, and the women abstain from farm work. In the subsequent eight days there is dancing and feasting.

The chief is buried like all male Esimbi with his body in the verandah and his head inside the room of the hut in which he lived. The Esimbi maintain that from former times they never buried the chief with any slave or animals as was practised in some places. As is the custom among the Esimbi, the utensils and personal effects of the deceased Chief (if not already stolen by his sons in the scramble for property which takes place even when the chief is breathing his last) are hung on the verandah beside the grave. The principal widow (first wife) lives in the house for the rest of her life, while the other wives of the late chief are shared by his brothers. The late Chief Wachong had eight wives; his successor being yet young, has two.

During the interregnum power rests with the Regency Council (Benatanyu) which is composed of elderly males. The chairman of the Regency Council (Ondlatanyin) is in charge of burial ceremonies of the late chief. He is guardian of tradition in the absence of the Chief and acts as Regent in concert with the other members of the Regency Council. It is he who, holding the hands of the new chief, publicly introduces him to the people. The Regent after the death of Chief Wachong was his equally elderly uncle Kum Ihimbru.

As elsewhere in Africa the process of installation of a new chief is divided into two parts — one secret, the other public. The secret ceremony takes place in the presence of the chief's family this includes the Regent) and five or six elderly people in the clan.

No information could be obtained about the secret ceremony which takes place behind closed doors, presumably in the fetish house. But by the time the new chief emerges from this ritual he has camwood (a red powder) rubbed on his legs. Holding the new Chief by the hand, the Regent then publicly introduces him to the assembled cheering mass of Esimbi men and women. Then follows the « installation dance » called « Ogholé » or « Oxolé » which is marked by much drumming and feasting. At this installation, the new Chief first sits on a crude three legged wooden throne (the « coronation stone » of the Esimbi) of great antiquity. This stool is kept in the council hall and is reputed to have been made by an Esimbi artist — God knows how long. A similar type of coronation chair is in use among the neighbouring Mukuru.



Coronation chairs new and old! In the background the old chief's house with his utensils hanging outside.

After sitting on the coronation chair during the secret ceremony of installation, the new Chief then sits on a modern cane chair when he is formally presented to the assembly of the Esimbi people.

MARRIAGE

Girls were formerly betrothed at birth, but nowadays they are betrothed at puberty. Dowry paid by the bridegroom consists of:

1. Dane guns — 8 to 10 (the Esimbi are hunters par excellence).

2. Goats.
3. Cash not exceeding £ 10 to £ 25 (Fr. 7 000 to Fr. 17 000 C. F. A.).
4. « Ibiyepere » — about 20.
5. Palm oil, honey, and other things used for preparing the marriage feast.

Total value of dowry in cash and kind comes to about £ 90 (Fr. 62 000).

A word about « Ibiyepere » may be necessary here. This is a *sine qua non* and without it marriage would be regarded as irregular. The « Ibiyepere » is a flat roughly triangular piece of crude iron which the Esimbi women use as hoes for farming. This was formerly imported from Esu and Aghem as the Esimbi themselves had not reached the iron age. About six Ibiyepere are equivalent to one goat (about 12 £. or Fr. 415 C. F. A.) in the Esimbi area.

As already stated elsewhere circumcision among Esimbi men takes place when the youths are fully grown to manhood and ready to enter into matrimony. When the youths are being circumcised with full ritual in their annual « mass circumcision camp », their fiancées are in attendance on them! As soon as the ceremony is over, marriage takes place.

OCCUPATIONS

The principal occupation of the Esimbi is hunting. They also fish and collect honey. When not hunting the men are engaged in the collection of palm oil, which has always made Esimbi-land the target of attack from their Aghem neighbours who being in the grassland do not possess palm trees. The women plant plantains, coco-yams, yams, maize, beans and groundnuts. The principal pastime of the Esimbi is dancing. This usually takes place in the Dry Season at around Christmas when the harvest is in. Hunting is easier and there is plenty of fish (from the now low rivers), and above all there is plenty of « masong » (palm wine) to go round and not un-naturally, this is also the marriage season!

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