

**ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION OF PRAISE SINGERS (GRIOTS) IN THE BAMENDA
GRASSFIELDS**

A HISTORICAL INVESTIGATION

BY

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ABSTRACT

Praise singers found in the Bamenda Grassfields originated from Northern Nigeria in the late 19th and early 20th century. In a classic essay, M.G. Smith (1957) analysed praise singing in Northern Nigeria as an institution that regulates social behaviour, by validating status, wielding sanctions and generally maintaining social norms. Hausa-Fulani praise singing in the Bamenda Grassfields was a high-status occupation (Griots), whether carried out by men or women.

In the Bamenda Grassfields, Praise singers-men or women, singles or bands-had different social positions in their respective societies. Some were professionals while others were amateurs or only occasional performers. Praise singers celebrated physical or social attributes, the attainment of power through achievements in trade or war, or condemned the social abuses of power.

In 1957, M.G. Smith published a seminal paper on the role of the male praise singer, the “Maroki”, among Northern Nigeria’s Muslim Hausa. Deborah Pellow on her part examines the role of the “Maroki” in the Diaspora community of Sabon Zongo in Accra. My paper or article seeks to explore the role of praise singers in the day to day running and development of their communities found in the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon. I also intend to ponder on the outcome of praise singing in that part of the country.

INTRODUCTION

When the Hausas and Fulani left Northern Nigeria to Northern Cameroon in the late 19th and early 20th Century, they came along with some praise singers. From Northern Cameroon, they migrated down South and settled in the Bamenda Grassfields during the first half of the 20th Century. By praise singers here (Griots), we are referring to some Hausa and Fulani men and women specialised in the playing of traditional musical instruments such as the Kalangou, Algaita, Kakaki, Tumbura, Garaya, and Banga. With the use of those traditional, musical instruments, they were able to praise wealthy people of high status in the society such as chiefs, Lamidos, Ardos, Sarikis, Waziri, Galadima, and Sarikin Pawa etc.¹

Apart from praising high ranking and wealthy Hausa and Fulani rulers and ordinary men, praise singers were also good oral historians. Praise singers in the Bamenda Grassfields were capable of memorising the whole history or genealogy of a Hausa or Fulani ruling class. They knew the in and out of every Fadah, Lamidates or Ardorates in the Bamenda Grassfields. As a matter of fact, Praise singers were oral historians par excellence. That accounted for the reason why they were appointed councillors or advisers to the Hausa and Fulani traditional rulers found in the Bamenda Grassfields.²

Geographical Location of the Bamenda Grassfields

The Bamenda Grassfields covers the present North West Region of Cameroon. It lies between Latitudes 5° 40 and 7° to the North of the Equator, and between Longitudes 9° 45 and 11° to the East of the Meridian. It is bordered to the South West by the South West Region, to the South by West Region, to the east by the Adamawa Region and to the North by the Federal Republic of Nigeria.³ The Bamenda Grassfields which is today the North West Region is one of the most populated Regions in Cameroon. It has one major metropolitan city: Bamenda. The Region saw an increase in population from about 1.2 million in 1987, to an estimated 1.8 million people in 2001. The population density, at 99.12 people per square Kilometres is higher than the national average of 22.6 people per square kilometre. The region

¹ P.N. Nkwi and J.P. Warnier, *Elements for a History of the Western Grassfields*, Yaounde, Publication of the Department of Sociology 1982, pp. 80-85; H.A.S. Johnson, *A Selection of Hausa Stories*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1966, pp. 9-10.

² N.F. Awason ; “The Hausa and Fulani in the Bamenda Grassland (1903-1960)”, Third Cycle Doctorate in History, University of Yaounde, 1984, pp. 15-60.

³ Nkwi and Warnier, *Western Grassfields*, pp. 2-15.

urban growth rate is 7.95%, while the rural growth rate at 1.16%. The North West Region is made up of administrative divisions; the region formally known as province was created in 1972 with five divisions. These were Mezam, Momo, Bui, Menchum and Donga and Mantung Divisions. Today it has seven divisions, Boyo carved out of Donga-Mantung and Menchum and Ngo ketunjia carved out of Mezam. There are thirty one Sub-division in the North West Region.⁴

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to examine the origin, migration and evolution of praise singers in the Bamenda Grassfields. What role did praise singers played in the evolution and development of the Hausa and Fulani communities of the Bamenda Grassfields.

Origin and Migration of Praise Singers to the Bamenda Grassfields

Most if not all praise singers found in the Bamenda Grassfields originated from Northern Nigeria. They were mostly from states such as Kano, Zaria, Kaduna, Sokoto, Jos Plateau, Katsina and Bornu. Majority of them were Hausas while others were Fulani. It should be noted that most if not all praised singers were children of praise singers themselves; As such, while growing up with the parents, they were initiated and trained to become future praise singers. Others were either orphans or children who grew up and had nothing doing. While growing up, they simply adhered to the profession.⁵

To become a praise singer, one needed to undergo a very long process of initiation and training. First of all he or she needed to stay with the master for a very long time while learning how to sing and play the various traditional musical instruments that accompanied praise singing. It was more of a master-servant relationship. The servant needed to pay allegiance to his master at every point in time. He was expected to be obedience and

⁴ Neba, *Modern Geography*, P. 171 : N.N. Emmanuel, "Settlement, Grazier or Agricultural land: A Confrontation of Interest in the North West Province of Cameroon", *Annals of the Faculty of letters and Social Sciences*, University of Yaounde, No 10, 1981, P. 175.

⁵ Interview with Sarikin Hausawa usmanu and Alhaji Zakari, Bamenda, 20th May 2008 ; Polly Hill, *Rural Hausa : A Village Setting*, London, Cambridge University Press, 1972, pp. 2-5.

respectful to him. This attitude was expected to be the same up to when he graduated from the master. Upon graduation, he was also proclaiming a master praise singer.⁶

The contingents of Hausa who left Northern Nigeria and migrated to Northern Cameroon had some praise singers among them commonly called “Maroka”. They left Northern Nigeria around the 19th Century and headed towards Cameroon. They finally arrive Northern Cameroon in the mid 19th Century. Having arrived Northern Cameroon, some of them settled in the Adamawa region. The praise singers who were among the Hausa contingents began exerting their profession. Others were even appointed advisers or councillors in some of the lamidates found in the Adamawa.⁷

The rest of the praise singers continued their southward March to the Bamenda Grassfields. When they arrived the Bamenda Grassfields, they settled alongside the other Hausa migrants. Many of those praise singers were among the contingents of Hausas immigrants who establish the big Hausa settlement in Abakpa-Mankon Town. Among some of them we had Aoudou Maroki, Mallam Dan Ina Maroki, Mallam Idi Maroki, Saidou mai Kalangou, Bahago Mai Kalangou, Karan Gusaw, Na Habu Mai Garaya, Babayo Mai Kalangou, Adama, Asabe, Ladi and Yende Mai Kalangou.⁸

The gradual influx of the Fulani into the Bamenda Grassfields in the first half of the 20th Century also saw an additional influx of praise singers into the region. This time, they were Fulani praise singers. They came along in the group led by Ardo Sabga of the Gosi clan from Banyo who later on settled in the Babanki Tungo escarpment over looking the Ndop plain now known as Sabga.⁹ From the Abakpo-Mankon Town and Sabga settlements, the praise singers began spreading to other parts of the Bamenda Grassfields such as Wum, Bali, Nkambe, Nso, Kom, Bafut, Santa, Ndop etc. By the end of the 1960s, Hausa and Fulani praise singers were spread all over the Bamenda Gassfields.¹⁰

Important Roles Played by Praise Singers (Griots) in the Community

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ M.Z. Njeuma, *Fulani Hegemony in Yola (Old Adamawa) 1809-1902*, Yaounde, Ceper, 1978, pp. 119-120; H.R. Rudin *Germans in the Cameroons 1884-1914, A case study of Modern Imperialism*, New York, Greenwood Press Publishers, 1938, pp. 107-110.

⁸ Awasom, “Hausa and Fulani”, pp. 15-50; Interview with Mohamadou Madugu, Hausa elder, Bamenda, 20th January 2009.

⁹ Ibid ; M.A. Pelican, “Getting along in the Grassfields : Interethnic Relations and Identity Politics in North West Cameroon”, PhD thesis, Martin-Luther Universität, Halle-Wittenberg, Germany, 2006, pp. 10-150.

¹⁰ Interview with Mohamadou Madugu.

Chief praise singers were first of all regarded as councillors or advisers of Hausas and Fulani Chiefs. Sarikin Hausawa Mallam Baba of Abakpa-Mankon Town had a chief praise singer among his councillors. Ardo Sabga also had chief praise singer among his councillors. Those chief praise singers knew the whole history and genealogy of the Hausa Fadah and Fulani Ardorate or Lamidate. They could recount off head how that chieftaincy began. Who were at the origin of it? They knew the parents and grand parents of almost all the Hausa and Fulani rulers of the Bamenda Grassfields.¹¹

As a matter of fact, the praise singers were well gifted as far as oral history is concerned. They could recount the history of the first Hausa chief who ever set foot in the Bamenda Grassfields up to the present one. They could also recount the history of the First Fulani Ardo, Ardo Sabga, up to the present one. Praise singers indeed were oral historians par excellence.¹²

Praise singing in the Bamenda Grassfields, a traditional form of oratory, was actually proclaiming another's name to honour him/her. Traditionally, each Hausa had at least one personal praise singer which relates genealogy and life accomplishment. The praise singer recites the praised person's genealogy, recounting his or her feats, fame, prosperity and influence.¹³

The praise singer (Griots) was an oral historian. He delivered history as a poet. He was a repository of oral tradition. He knew many traditional songs without error. He was also expected to have the ability to extemporize on current events, chance incidents and the passing of scene. His wit could be devastating and his knowledge of local history formidable. Griots in the Bamenda Grassfields also used vocal expertise for gossip, satire or political comments. One of those praise singers noted for devastating wit was Karan Gusaw.¹⁴

Praise singers (Griots) in the Bamenda Grassfields were also advisors, arbitrators, and patronage and story tellers. These musicians were walking history books, preserving their ancient stories and traditions through songs. Their inherited tradition was passed down through generations. They were said to have deep connections to spiritual, social and political powers as music is associated as such speech is also said to have power, as it can recreate history and relationships. Examples of these famous oral traditional praise singers in the

¹¹ Interview with Sarikin Hausawa Usmanu and Alhaji Zakari.

¹² Idem.

¹³ Interview with Sarikin Hausa Usmanu ; Deborah Pellow, "Male Praise Singers in Accra in the Company of Women", *Africa, Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 67, 1997, p. 1-3.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Bamenda Grassfields were Aoudou Maroki, Mallam Dan Ina Maroki and Mallam Idi Maroki.¹⁵

Most villages in the Bamenda Grassfields had their praise singers (Griots) who told tales of births, deaths, marriages, battles, hunts, affairs and hundreds of other things. The praise singers were expected to recount both the positive and negative deeds of the sovereign. These included for example details on the ruler's bad temper or his latest misdemeanour. The praise singers had to be intelligent, deeply spiritual person of the highest repute amongst his society. The song he sung had to be memorable, composed in such a way that every line which was spoken in classical, poetic language would be easy to be remembered.¹⁶

In the Bamenda Grassfields, Hausa and Fulani live in a group of communities that were organised centrally: each contains a hierarchy of offices competed for by important men, an electorally based chieftaincy, and a set of occupational titles. Occupational classification is the most important factor in the evaluation of Social status. Occupational groups were also ranked in order of status, with officials, Mallams, and well-to-do merchants at the top.¹⁷

The segregation of Hausa-Fulani men from women praise singers was epitomised by the institution of Purdah or Kulle. Housing was appropriately designed to protect adult women from the gaze of unrelated men. Men and Women share neither social or physical space, and most women's activities-work or leisure-were carried out within the women's quarters. Market trading, so popular among coast West African Women, was confined to the compounds, with young children acting as runners, carrying the product to sell to women secluded in other compounds.¹⁸

Praise singing was one of the most common poetic modes in Africa. From the South Western edges of the Sahara Desert to the shores of the Indian Ocean peoples sing praises of themselves, or of their gods, their husbands, chiefs, kings, or even of their cattle. The services of praise singers were often solicited during circumcision, birth, death, and marriage ceremonies. Among the Hausa-Fulani in the Bamenda Grassfields most especially, praise

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Interview with Sarikin Hausa Usmanu ; Deborah Pellow, "Male Praise Singers in Accra : in the Company of Women", Africa, Journal of the International African Institute, Vol. 67, 1997, p. 1-3.

¹⁸ Ibid.

singers often displayed during important feast such as the feast of the Ramadan and the Feast of the Ram.¹⁹

The singers, men or women, singles or bands had different social positions to their respective societies. Some were professionals while others were amateurs or occasional performers. The poetic tradition themselves had a broad thematic range. They celebrated physical or social attributes, the attainment of power through achievements in trade or war, or condemned the social abuse of such power. In seeking explanations for praise singing as a cultural institution, scholars turned to theories which were as far different from each other as theories of social structure were from those of literary evolution. In the latter case they looked to establish parallels to developments in classical literature in which praise poetry and epic recitation occur in successive historical periods.²⁰

Praise singing in the Bamenda Grassfields was some sought of an institution that regulates social behaviour, by validating status, wielding sanctions, and generally maintaining social norms. Hausa-Fulani praise singing was a high status occupation; even though later became a low-status occupation. While Bamenda Grassfields Hausa-Fulani communities were considerably diluted in their Islamic orthodoxy, they were nonetheless distinctly Islamic in tone, witness the mosques, Quranic schools, flowing robes and diaphanous prayer veils, and a general cultural orientation that was strongly influenced by the Hausa-Fulani and distinct from their Christian counterpart. Praise singing brought together issues of micro-politics and Islam with grassfields dwellers in Bamenda and the construction of the separate worlds of men and women. Praise singers explored Hausa-Fulani culture, especially male-female relations. These were real occasions for praise singers to show the importance of patronage in this status-conscious-society. Praise singers in the Bamenda Grassfields carried gender-neutral status which enabled the performers to mediate between the sexes.²¹

The Hausa and Fulani Chiefs always sought the advice of their chief praise singers before taking important decisions in the *Fadah* and *Ardorate*. The praise singers also help the Hausa and Fulani Chiefs in resolving certain disputes in their various palaces. Messages and important announcements from the Hausa and Fulani Chiefs were dispatched to the community by praise singers. In case there was any danger threatening the community, the praise singers immediately alerted the chiefs. Praise singers also betrayed traitors to the chiefs

¹⁹ Ibid; T.R.M. Musi, “Anthropology, Literature and the Arts”, African Studies Review, Vol. 36, No3, 1993, p. 144.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Interview with Mohamadou Madugu ; Deborah, “Male Praise Singer”, pp. 1-3.

and they were punished. In case of any conspiracy in the palace, the Praise singer immediately alerted the chief or ruling class.²² Praise singers played very important role in the political, economic, social and cultural development of their community. Oral histories concerning the Hausa and Fulani community were always gotten from the praise singers.

Traditional Musical Instruments used by the Praise Singers

Among the different traditional musical instruments use by the praise singers in the Bamenda Grssfields were the Kalangou, Tumbura, Algaita, Garaya, Kakaki, and the Banga. All of these instruments along side the voices of the male and female praise singers, messages were passed out to the community. Most of those messages revolve around the political, economic, social and cultural well being of the community. Praise singers had special way of announcing virtues and vices in the society.²³

Traditional musical instruments were always brought out during special occasions. For example, when a Hausa or Fulani Chiefs was about to go out during end of year festivities like the feast of the Ramadan and feast of the Ram. Traditional musical instruments were also used during naming and marriage ceremonies. As what concerns the different sounds, they mostly varied depending on the messages being passed. The different Hausa and Fulani Chiefs mastered very well the different sounds coming out of the musical instruments. When it was announcing good things, they knew and when it was a sign of warning, they immediately took measures to guide against the imminent danger.²⁴

Praise singers in the Bamenda Grassfields also used the traditional musical instruments for advertisement purposes. During the day, Hausa and Fulani praise singers acted as advertisement agents to butchers and other traders by drumming and singing around their market sites in order to attract customers. They were then compensated by their employers. Praise singers became so famous in the Bamenda Grassfields. Majority especially the Chief praise singers were very wealthy people.²⁵ They used to build huge mansions with the money they got from praise singing. They put on expensive gowns and attires. Some of them got married to up to four wives. They also put forth many children. Examples of some wealthy praise singers in the Bamenda Grassfields were Saidou Mai Kalangou and Na Habu

²² E.M. Chilver and P.M. Kaberry, *Traditional Bamenda: The Pre-colonial History and Ethnography of Bamenda*, Buea, Government Printers, 1967, pp. 10-135; Interview with Mohamadou Madugu.

²³ Ibid; J.H. Greenberg, "Linguistic Evidence for the Influence of Kanuri on the Hausa", *Journal of African History*, 1960.

²⁴ Interview with Sarikin Hausawa Usmanu and Alhaji Zakari.

²⁵ Awasom, "Hausa and Fulani", pp. 15-60.

Mai Garaya. Praise singing was a real profession in the Bamenda Grassfields. Hausa and Fulani Chiefs took good care of praise singers. They provided them houses to stay and food to eat. Taking into consideration that praise singers played very important roles in Hausa and Fulani palaces, they were well defended by those chiefs and provided good security.²⁶

Outcome of Praise Singers in the Bamenda Grassfields

With the passage of time, praise singing began losing its value in the Bamenda Grassfields. Most of the praise singers were not more playing the role they used to play. First of all, they were not more appointed as advisers or councillors of the Hausa and Fulani Chiefs. Most of the children of praise singers hardly follow the footsteps of their parents. Some of them considered the profession as disgraceful and low class. The few who have taken over the profession hardly memorise the oral history of their community. Majority claimed to be praise singers because their parents were praise singers without having undergone any training or initiation to become one. The worst of it is that, most of the praise singers nowadays are more of Berger's than *Griots*.²⁷ This bad comportment had degraded them to become the last and most common people in the society. This has painted a bad image of them in the community. Most of the praise singers receive insults before they are given money. Some of them have become very immoral and nuisance to the society. The men spend most of their time drinking while the women go on prostituting. This had made the praise singing profession to become the most disgraceful profession in the society.²⁸

CONCLUSION

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, contingents of Hausa and Fulani praise singers left Northern Nigeria to Northern Cameroon. From Northern Cameroon, they continued their movements southward and finally arrived the Bamenda Grassfields where they settled. These praise singers were oral historians otherwise known as griots that could memorise and easily recount the whole history of their community. Majority of them were later appointed advisers or councillors of Hausa and Fulani Chiefs in the Bamenda Grassfields. From then henceforth, praise singers played very important role politically, economically, socially and culturally in the development and advancement of their community. By the year 1960, praise singers were

²⁶ Interview with Mohamadou Madugu.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

spread all over the Bamenda Grassfields. Apart from their role of advisers or councillors to the chiefs, they also acted as advertisement agents to butchers and other traders. They also entertained ceremonies such as naming, and marriage ceremonies, as well as important Muslim feast such as the feast of the Ramadan and feast of the Ram. Unfortunately, as time went on, praise singers were not more playing the important role they used to play. Most of them lost their value in the society. Praise singers were unable to follow the foot steps of their parents. They became more of Bergers than oral historians who had the moral duty of informing their people of the daily happenings in the community.

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