

---

## Tradition, Invention and History : The Case of the Ngondo (Cameroon).

Monsieur Ralph A. Austen

### Résumé

R. A. Austen — Tradition, invention et histoire: le cas du Ngondo (Cameroun).

Les Douala prétendent que, avant la colonisation, leur société était dirigée par le Ngondo, une assemblée populaire présidée par les chefs des principaux segments locaux. Cependant, la documentation historique traitant des activités et du pouvoir que le Ngondo est censé avoir exercés ne permet pas d'affirmer qu'une telle institution centralisée ait existé avant la colonisation, ou même qu'il en ait été simplement question avant la Deuxième Guerre mondiale. En fait, ce n'est qu'à la fin des années 1940 que l'on peut repérer avec précision l'émergence de cette institution et la mettre en rapport avec les conflits intra- et inter-ethniques de l'immédiat après-guerre. Par ailleurs, la tradition du Ngondo, qui comporte une fête annuelle commémorative, ne doit pas être vue uniquement comme un instrument politique, mais également comme le lieu d'expression privilégié d'un discours particulièrement riche, quoique non dénué d'ambiguïté, sur l'histoire, la culture et l'identité douala.

---

### Citer ce document / Cite this document :

Austen Ralph A. Tradition, Invention and History : The Case of the Ngondo (Cameroon).. In: Cahiers d'études africaines, vol. 32, n°126, 1992. pp. 285-309;

doi : <https://doi.org/10.3406/cea.1992.1557>

[https://www.persee.fr/doc/cea\\_0008-0055\\_1992\\_num\\_32\\_126\\_1557](https://www.persee.fr/doc/cea_0008-0055_1992_num_32_126_1557)

---

Fichier pdf généré le 17/05/2018

Ralph Austen

# Tradition, Invention and History: The Case of the Ngondo, (Cameroon)\*

In the spring of 1951 Betoté Akwa, the most prominent hereditary ruler of the Cameroon coast, petitioned the local French colonial administration to declare June 19 as an annual official holiday. The reason given was that on this date two years earlier the Duala leadership had staged “la Manifestation commémorative de notre Assemblée traditionnelle”.<sup>1</sup>

At the time and in most subsequent contemplations of Cameroon history, the Duala effort to reestablish the Assemblée or Ngondo has been interpreted as an act of anticolonial self-assertion.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, despite French hostility, the Ngondo flourished throughout the era of decolonization as a vehicle of Duala political and cultural aspirations and was only suppressed twenty-one years after independence when the authoritarian Ahidjo regime stigmatized it as an unrecognized “association tribale”.<sup>3</sup> From a more distant postcolonial perspective, however, Betoté’s undertaking represents an almost perfect model of “the invention of tradition”. What he and his group sought to celebrate was, after all, not an event or even an institution from the past but rather the act of producing the memory of this past.

Contemporary modes of scholarship provide us with a familiar proce-

\* Ngondo, or Assemblée Traditionnelle du Peuple Douala. I wish to thank Manga Bekombo Priso and Jonathan Derrick for their comments and other valuable assistance with this article.

1. “Betoté Akwa au Haut Commissaire, 4 avril, 6 juin 1951”, Archives nationales du Cameroun (Yaoundé) (hereafter ANC), Affaires politiques et administratives (hereafter APA), 12406.
2. The French addressees of Betoté’s request first made him resubmit it with a proper administrative stamp and then refused to declare holidays on any occasion other than “fêtes légales” (“Haut Commissaire à l’Administrateur de la Région de Wouri, 18 juin 1951”, ANC/APA 12406); for the Ngondo in decolonization politics, see JOSEPH 1977, FANKEM 1990.
3. “Gouverneur du Littoral à Mandengue Ntoné, 13 déc, 1981” [forbidding the annual Ngondo festival], Archives de Léopold Moumé Etia (hereafter ALME), Deido, Douala. The Ngondo was revived in 1991.

cedure for dealing with such a phenomenon, which is by no means peculiar to Africa (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983). First the historical claims of the tradition are subjected to an empirical test which can be expected (and the Ngondo case is no exception) to reveal a great gap between the more immediate records of the past and its later reconstruction. Secondly, the process of invention is placed within its own immediate context to explain why the past needed to be imagined in this particular way.

The problem with such an approach in African studies is that it can lead to the nihilistic position of reducing all historical claims about cultural identity to the more easily documented dialectics of colonial and post-colonial struggles (Amselle 1990). A position like this is difficult for Africans themselves to accept, even when they are most steeped in post-modernist theory.<sup>4</sup> It also presents serious personal and ethical problems for expatriate researchers who, by publishing such conclusions, may feel that they are betraying local informants and collaborators who believe in their own traditions and trust us to respect them.

But perhaps it is unnecessary to choose so sharply between nihilism and the acceptance of untenable accounts of the past. This essay will thus challenge the form in which the Ngondo tradition has been officially presented while treating seriously both the history of such contemplation and the objects other than historical narrative which constitute the tradition. The Ngondo tradition may not provide an accurate account of the events and institutions of the past, but it remains an important vehicle for connecting that past to present-day Duala existence.

### The Ngondo tradition vs/as history

Although the Duala are a rather small community, never numbering more than twenty to thirty thousand, they have achieved a certain renown in African history due to their precolonial role as commercial middlemen between the Cameroon coast and interior as well as their prominence among the twentieth-century Cameroonian educated elite. However, the Duala have never been famous for their indigenous political organization which appears to have followed a classical and often quite disorderly pattern of segmentation among competing entourages of mercantile "big men" (Austin 1983; Vansina 1983: 79-83).

The immediate problem for an historian confronting the Ngondo tradition is that it challenges the manifest evidence of political disorder with a claim for the existence of an effective centralizing institution. According to this tradition the Ngondo first came into existence during the early 1800s and functioned for the rest of the century as a judicial or (the accounts are inconsistent) general governing body presided over by the

4. This dilemma is classically presented— but also acted out — in MUDIMBE 1988.

major Duala chiefs. After its suppression by the colonial government of Cameroon, the Ngondo is said to have operated up to about 1930 as the clandestine organizer of resistance against European authorities. This account of the Ngondo was given formal expression in a detailed historiography produced soon after the post World War II “commémoration” and has been incorporated into most subsequent scholarship.<sup>5</sup>

The Ngondo is supposed to have originated during the early nineteenth century, shortly after the first split of the Duala lineages into major competing chiefdoms of Bell and Akwa. The immediate occasion was the disturbance of an inland market place by a local giant, Malobé whose apprehension, judgement and punishment required the creation of a new collective Duala institution.<sup>6</sup> The next remembered figure to come before the Ngondo was one among the major Duala chiefs themselves, Eyum Ebelé/Charley Deido,<sup>7</sup> who was executed at the order of the court in 1876. When, in 1884, Germany declared a colonial protectorate over Cameroon, the group of chiefs who signed the critical treaty of annexation are also identified with the Ngondo. Finally, the Ngondo is given credit for a whole series of delegations, petitions and other acts of anticolonial protest undertaken by the Duala against both German and French rulers.

With the exception of the Malobé incident, all of the specific events associated with the history of the Ngondo are sufficiently well documented from contemporary written sources so that we can check the empirical veracity of the modern oral tradition in which they are now embodied. The history being recalled here (even, as will be seen, that of Malobé) is not simply imagined. However, it should be noted at the outset that neither in the contemporary documents nor in the oral traditions recorded before 1945 is there any reference to the Ngondo. What we can find is some consciousness of the need for an institution of this kind which begins to take a shape resembling the Ngondo tradition only after World War I.

The Malobé story, for which there are no written sources, stands up quite well as a real or at least representative event. It is fully developed

5. The earliest record of the full Ngondo history which I have found is contained in the opening pages of a report by the director of the Cameroun Sureté (P. Divol, “*Le Ngondo*”, ou *Assemblée Traditionnelle du Peuple de Douala*, 28 août 1952, ANC, 2-AC 124/A). The standard studies are HARTER 1968, DOUMBÉ MOULANGO 1972. For a later expatriate work adopting an extreme form of the Ngondo tradition, see BALANDIER 1975; for more moderate versions, see FANKEM 1990, ECKERT 1991. The most recent publication is NDOUMBÉ NDOUMBÉ 1991.
6. NDOUMBÉ NDOUMBÉ (1991) argues for a prior motivation—“réglementer le commerce entre les Portugais et les indigènes”—but also places this in the early 1880s.
7. Precolonial Duala rulers are conventionally known by both Duala-language and Pidgin names; the latter often indicates their affiliation with the current major quarters of the city of Douala (Bell, Akwa, Deido, Bonaberi).

in both Duala and Pongo (Malobé's inland community) tradition and also enshrined in the presumedly quite old texts of a Duala canoe song and proverb.<sup>8</sup> Neither the song nor the proverb, however, makes any mention of the Ngondo and it is this part of the story, rather than the market conflict, which remains in doubt.<sup>9</sup>

The key precolonial event for considering the historicity of the Ngondo tradition is the execution of Eyum Ebelé/Charley Deido in December 1876. We have two detailed accounts of this incident from Europeans present in Douala at the time, the Baptist missionary George Grenfell and the German merchant, Johannes Voss.<sup>10</sup> Neither source makes any reference to a court or other Duala collective body of any kind but Grenfell does record an indigenous explanation for why Eyum was killed on the sand bank from which the Ngondo takes its name.<sup>11</sup> The bank is located at the outlet of the brook which divides the territories of the two main Duala segments, Bell and Akwa (it was long the site of the modern Douala Central Market and railroad station). Grenfell reports that Eyum's captors kept him from entering the nearest settled area where "he would, according to 'country fashion', have been under Bell's protection." Just before being shot he was "carried out a little way towards the water, and laid upon his back for the people believed that if he died with his face to the ground he would work them some mischief".<sup>12</sup>

A second link to the Ngondo tradition can be found in the reference to a legal injunction, fatally disregarded by Eyum, to deliver up a murderer from among his subjects. According to Grenfell "the law of 'a life for a life' was made about a year ago". While this injunction corresponds to the "loi de Dibombé" (blood vengeance) of the Ngondo tradition, there is

8. The song can be heard currently; the proverb was recorded sometime before World War I by a German missionary who was not, however, given an historical explanation of its meaning (EBDING 1959: 142).
9. Recent Pongo oral accounts do link Malobé to the Ngondo but also add to the standard story of his punishment by sale into New World slavery a claim that in Jamaica he married and fathered children who became, in turn, the parents of Alfred Saker, the first European missionary in Cameroon (elders of Bomono ba Jeru, April 18, 1975).
10. G. Grenfell, "Africa. Letter from Mr Grenfell", *Baptist Missionary Herald*, July 1, 1877, pp. 147-148; J. Voss, "Report", n.d. [ca. Apr. 1884], Nigerian National Archives (Ibadan), CSO (Chief Secretary's Office) 6/3/5.
11. For more discussion of this name, see below. Grenfell (cf. *supra* fn. 10) does not use the word Ngondo, but several oral histories of the Deido (Bonabelé) Douala quarter collected before World War I do name the site in association with Eyum's father, Ebelé, even calling it Songo a Ebelé ("Ebelé's Grave"); these sources do not, however, link Eyum's execution to either a Ngondo court or location: see "Miango ma Bonebela [sic]/Die Geschichte von Bonebela", Part 2, Duala-Arbeiten, Ebding Nachlass, Seminar für Afrikanische Sprachen und Kulturen, Hamburg; also Joseph Ekolo & Ernst Dinkelacker, "Mangea ma Duala/Wege der Duala", pp. 11-18, Ittmann Nachlass, Basel Mission Society Archives, Basel.
12. Grenfell, see ref. *supra* fn. 10.

something quite contradictory about decreeing with such formality the very practice one would expect to find in the absence of any organized justice. The Deido traditions ascribes the initial judgement action against Eyum (but not the intervention of his fellow chiefs) to a more likely institutional authority, the Elong, an *isango* (pl. *losango* = cult society), which could be used to enforce general social practices through the sanction of secret, preternatural forces.<sup>13</sup>

Voss gives us a clue to the association of these events with a more public and generalized form of legislation by dating the law of retaliation to 1873 and conflicts at that time between Bell and his subordinates. We can now place Eyum's death within the larger historical context of Duala segmentary politics and the recorded efforts to resolve them through British intervention.

Segmentary politics are always difficult to narrate in a coherent fashion so suffice it to say here that the rise of Deido under the very aggressive and violent Eyum upset the balance of power between Bell and Akwa at a time when falling palm oil prices were already exacerbating the chronic disorder in Douala commercial life.<sup>14</sup> The precedents of the earlier 1870s to which Voss refers center on an extended war between Bell and Akwa, involving the usual defections of subordinates on both sides but complicated further by Deido participation. In this as in similar Duala conflicts the only institution to which the quarrelling parties could turn was the peripatetic British consul for the Bights of Benin and Biafra.

The consul possessed a degree of political prestige as well as the support of Royal Navy firepower which allowed him to enforce at least temporary resolutions of strife among coastal African factions and between African and European merchants. However local British resources were stretched thin over a large region and the consuls eagerly sought (and often invented) local authorities with whom to sign treaties. In 1850 consul John Beecroft therefore attempted to end the Duala practice of forcibly seizing the personae and kin of recalcitrant debtors through an agreement that "all future disputes of this kind between natives themselves shall be adjusted by the Kings and Chiefs assembled, their decision to be final".<sup>15</sup>

13. "Miango ma Bonebela", Part 4 (see ref. *supra* fn. 11). According to this account the supporters of the accused murderer countered the verdict of the Deido elders with a threat to "buy our own elong elsewhere". (See more on the *losango* below.) The text by J. Ekolo and E. Dinkelacker (see ref. *supra* fn. 11) speaks of a *topino bwambo* (palaver, translated as "grosses Volksversammlung") held *after* Eyum's death to condemn one of his successors.

14. For a fuller account, see ch. 3 of AUSTEN & DERRICK (fthcg); the Ngondo tradition and related oral accounts give their own versions of these events which might usefully be compared in more detail with contemporary records than is possible here or in our book.

15. Article IX, Treaty of December 17, 1850 (ARDENER 1968: 73). The French translation of part of this text as "L'Assemblée des Rois et Chefs" is read as an (admittedly unique) reference to the Ngondo by both HARTER (1968: 96) and BRUTSCH (1955: 14-16); the English original allows no such interpretation.

The evident failure of the Duala rulers, however assembled, to keep order in local markets led another consul in 1856 to impose upon Cameroon a device already instituted elsewhere in the British West African sphere of "informal empire", the Court of Equity. This tribunal, which was officially supervised by the consul, brought together both indigenous chiefs and the representatives of European trading firms and missionary societies at each port (Dike 1956: 126-127; Jones 1961: 77-78, 221-222). In Douala, however, the Court of Equity never functioned very satisfactorily and had to be reestablished several times up through the first years of German colonial rule.<sup>16</sup> During the Bell-Akwa wars of the early 1870s the Court's sin appears to have an over-extension of its jurisdiction, leading the consul to order that it stay out of intra-African affairs: "Her Majesty's Government can hardly approve of missionaries and traders becoming native rulers".<sup>17</sup>

It is apparently this ruling which Grenfell and Voss had in mind (since neither seems to have known anything about the Elong) when they discuss a legal basis for the action against Eyum Ebelé in 1876. The other Duala chiefs were acting not on behalf of their own *Assemblée traditionnelle* but rather in response to the abdication of its previous powers by the Court of Equity, whose European members were also anxious to end Eyum's disruptive career. Eyum's execution was certainly carried out in Duala terms and the fact that the consular records never even make reference to the affair indicates that, in this case, the action of the chiefs achieved its goal. However, the absence of any collective institution either guiding or deriving from the events of December 1876 is accentuated by the continuing segmentary conflict between and within the Bell and Akwa groups, leading to appeals in the immediately following years for more permanent intervention by European authorities.

The developments preceding and surrounding the Duala-German protection treaty of July 1884 are, as might be expected, well documented from a variety of sources and have been extensively studied (Jaek 1960: 64-77; Ardener 1968; Wirz 1973: 50-58). They do demonstrate a relative degree of unity between the Akwa and Bell rulers, resulting largely from despair at solving their political problems by local means. But even here, the chief of one of the four major Douala quarters, Bonaberi, refused to sign the annexation agreement and in December 1884 allied with a Bell faction to start a minor but quite bloody war, first against Bell and then the Germans.

There is no need to review at length the various Duala actions against German and French colonial authorities since these are even better recorded than the diplomacy of the nineteenth century (Derrick 1979;

16. These changes are documented in detail in AUSTEN & DERRICK (1979: ch. 3-4).

17. "Consul Livingstone to Douala Court of Equity, June 28, 1872", Public Records Office (London), Foreign Office (hereafter PRO/FO) 84/1356.

Eckert 1991; Rüger 1968). The omission of any reference to the Ngondo is particularly striking in one text composed very near the end of the German period by Mpundo Akwa, a major figure in Duala anticolonial efforts who was also notorious for his imagining of an aggrandized precolonial political order.<sup>18</sup>

Curiously, the canonical oral tradition does not include the one documented moment in Duala history when at least two of the major chiefs acted in the kind of concert which fits the Ngondo model. Immediately after World War I, Duala leaders, along with all Cameroon notables, came under pressure to declare allegiance to a French colonial administration which had not yet received its official mandate authority. According to a European report: "The chiefs demanded time to consult their people and a meeting of the tribes was held that night at Bell Town. This sitting lasted all night and is an ancient custom of the natives when anything serious and important has to be decided".<sup>19</sup>

The meeting in question apparently involved only Akwa and Bell and hardly supports the notion of any formal institution called Ngondo; but it does at least indicate that the practice of collective consultation (undoubtedly at various levels of Duala lineage organization) had some historical reality.

The definition of such responses to colonialism in terms of the Ngondo tradition developed gradually in the next decades. The first mention of the Ngondo brook and sand bar in this connection comes in 1926 when a petition of the "Chefs et notables de Douala" to the French High Commissioner requested that the colonial government restore to African use a building formerly housing the "Tribunal de Races" (Native Court) "qui est à Ngondo (derrière l'usine de la gare du Chemin de fer du Centre à Douala." The justification for this claim is not any precolonial precedent for the court and its site or even a demand that the building continue to serve a judicial function but rather the fact that it was constructed from the Tribunal de Races revenues. The petitioners cited German colonial legislation to argue that all such funds "appartiennent aux indigènes."<sup>20</sup>

Three years later another petition was sent to the League of Nations bearing the signatures of all four major Duala chiefs under the heading "Grande Assemblée populaire sous la protection des Chefs Supérieurs qui ont conclu comme souverains indépendants avec le gouvernement alle-

18. "Mpundo Akwa au Gouverneur Ebermaier", n.d. [ca. Jan.-Feb. 1914], ANC, TA (Traduction allemande) 6; see also AUSTEN 1986: 217-221.

19. Letter of John Holt, Douala representative to Liverpool, Feb. 4, 1919, enclosed in Holt to Foreign Office, May 8, 1919, p. 307, PRO/FO 3712/3774; for the petition to the Versailles Peace Conference (by a somewhat different group of Duala chiefs) in August 1919, see ECKERT 1991: 306-309.

20. Petition of Dec. 22, 1926, paragraph V (carbon copy held in the Bell Family Archives, Douala; this document is unsigned and since no copy exists in the French colonial archives it may well never have been dispatched).



mand le traité politique du 1884".<sup>21</sup> While there is no mention of the Ngondo as place or institution in this document the drawing up of the petition was a major local event and its language may have influenced subsequent reflections upon the past.

The transformation of the references and rhetoric of petitions into a new concept of precolonial political life can be seen in the response to a government ethnographic inquiry drawn up in 1936 by the well-known separatist church leader and proto-nationalist Lotin Samé.<sup>22</sup> Lotin here states that in the past a "Grande Assemblée du Peuple" judged Duala chiefs and was responsible for the execution of Eyum Ebelé on the Ngondo sand bank (located but not named here). The annexation treaty with the Germans is described by Lotin as an attempt by unspecified rulers to escape from this authority. He also discusses a traditional system of judicial appeals from household through quarter chiefs to an "Assemblée Générale du Peuple" connected somehow with the cult of *jengu* water spirit (to be discussed below).

Lotin Samé's text, which apparently remained buried in the archives of the Cameroon branch of IFAN (Institut français d'Afrique noire, the French colonial research organization) cannot be treated as direct evidence of anything historical other than the thinking of its author. However, such thinking is quite representative of the 1930s, when the Duala elite temporarily abandoned direct political action against colonial rule in favor of organizations dedicated to cultivating their oral traditions and cultural practices (Derrick 1989: 115-118). Unfortunately, many of the documents of this intellectual activity were destroyed during later political conflicts with French authorities. Those that survive are more concerned with the origins of the Duala and the genealogies of particular chiefdoms than with the joint affairs of the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>23</sup> Further research may yet reveal more extensive and perhaps earlier sources for the Ngondo tradition. But for now it appears that the full articulation of this idea occurred only in the mid-1940s.<sup>24</sup>

21. Pétition du 19 décembre 1929, ANC/APA 10890.

22. A. Lotin Samé, "Étude concernant les coutumes Douala, 20 juin 1936", Institut des sciences humaines (Yaoundé), dossier W 201, mimeo. On Lotin more generally, see JOSEPH 1980: 20-31.

23. GOUELLAIN 1975: 56-81. A variant account of the origins of the Ngondo is contained in the historical tradition of the Idubwan a Bell Ebelé (IBB), an organization founded in the inter-war era in Bonaberi; however, the Ngondo episode seems to have been composed at a later time since it appears as an "addendum" to a version of the IBB tradition published in a study undertaken by R. Bureau during the 1950s; the author had the entire text translated for him from a manuscript whose pages are "usées et souvent effacées" (BUREAU 1962: 319, 336-337).

24. None of my older informants could remember having heard of the Ngondo before World War II.

## The Ngondo as Invention and Politics

If the literal historical claims of the post-World War II Ngondo are dubious, the degree to which they were and are believed suggests that a tradition of this kind met serious social needs during the period of its inception and also contains enduring elements of what must be regarded as cultural truth. It is easiest to begin our analysis with the issue of needs, since the Ngondo of the 1940s and 1950s played its most obvious historical role as a political organization, taking politics in its broadest sense as the domain of publicly contested social issues.

The politics to which the Ngondo addressed itself was that of colonialism in a phase which was both liberating and menacing to its African subjects. On the one hand a whole series of reforms beginning with the Brazzaville Declaration of 1944 removed such burdens as prestation and the *indigénat* while offering new possibilities for participation in the affairs of state. On the other hand, post-World War II France (along with Britain) greatly increased investments in its African possessions, which now seemed far more vital to the welfare and international standing of the metropole than at any point since their annexation (Austen 1987: 197-216). The latter aspects of the new colonialism were particularly evident in Douala, which owes to this era much of its modern harbor as well as the bridge linking it with the rich agricultural lands of western Cameroon.

For the Duala people as individuals, the post-war situation was particularly promising, since more of them than any other Cameroonians possessed the educational qualifications to take advantage of recently opened opportunities. As a community, however, the Duala now faced a whole series of dangers: the further decline of the commercial agriculture and urban land-rents which had replaced their previous merchant economic role; the possibility of subordination to more numerous inland groups should electoral politics be introduced into either Cameroon or even the city of Douala; and the lack of a common political organization to defend those assets which they still retained.

The Ngondo ultimately dealt with all these needs but to understand its role we must begin by considering the failure of alternative bases for political organization and indeed, of other invented traditions. Given the kind of "tradition" which evolved from colonial dialectics in most parts of Africa, one would expect Duala ethnic politics to construct itself not around a semi-populist institution like the Ngondo but rather upon the more obvious foundation of chiefdom (Ranger 1983).

In fact, for the first decades of colonial rule chiefdom was the chosen vehicle for both European and Duala management and imagination of their mutual affairs. The Germans, up to 1913, ruled the Duala by conferring an unprecedented concentration of political power and prestige upon the Bell dynasty at the expense of its Akwa rivals. This mutually beneficial arrangement came to an abrupt end just before World War I when

German attempts to expropriate land in the Bell quarter of Douala met with such stubborn resistance that the colonial authorities not only deposed the sitting ruler, Rudolph Duala Manga Bell, but in 1914 executed him for high treason (Austen 1977b).

The new French rulers of Douala never saw fit to promote any local chief to a status comparable to that held earlier by the Bells, in part partly as a reaction against the perceived rebelliousness of the Duala people. However, hierarchy within individual chiefdoms and not a conciliar Ngondo continued to dominate the imaginations of the major players in Duala politics, including two men who both insisted on being addressed as "Prince": Ludwig Mpundo, the Akwa counterpart of Rudolph Bell, and Rudolph's son, Alexander Ndoumbé Douala Manga Bell.<sup>25</sup>

Due to the martyr status of his father and his own education and charm, Alexander Bell did achieve great political prominence in both Douala and Cameroon as a whole; he was elected as Cameroonian representative, first to the conferences which drew up the constitution for the French Fourth Republic in 1945 and in the next year to the French National Assembly. However, among the most politically aware Dualas, Alexander represented the failure rather than the promise of chieftaincy. He was unquestionably a vain, self-indulgent and somewhat frivolous man who, despite a few anti-racist gestures, became entirely subservient to his French patrons and showed particular weakness in the Bells' struggle of the inter-war decades to recover urban land appropriated by the Germans (Derrick 1979).

The most serious figure among the Duala chiefs of this era was Betoté Akwa who, as noted in the opening of this essay, did come to identify himself closely with the Ngondo. However, Betoté had been deposed and imprisoned by the French in the 1920s and in order to retain his restored position as Chef Supérieur in the next decade, was also forced to take a compromising political posture, particularly again on the all-important urban land question.<sup>26</sup>

By the onset of World War II Duala leaders had given up all their illusions about hereditary rulers, whether living or dead. The immediate origins of the 1940s Ngondo lie, therefore, not in the domain of Bell and Akwa chiefdoms but rather in direct opposition to these established centers of

25. JOSEPH 1974a. On Mpundo, see ref. *supra* fn. 18. Mpundo was killed by the Germans in 1914 but for decades afterwards many Akwas thought he was still alive and would return to them.

26. AUSTEN & DERRICK ftheg: ch. 5; see also "Betesedi be Janea la Kin 'Akwa'" ["Rules of the Government of King Akwa"], Dec. 16, 1933, Dossiers Divers, Archives de l'Église évangélique du Cameroun, Douala. This document, is signed by Betoté, other Akwa notables and the French administrator Forelly and in it the very limited powers and responsibilities of the Akwa chief are spelled out; there is no mention of the Ngondo (Dossiers divers, Archives de l'Église évangélique du Cameroun, Douala).

Duala politics. For reasons of both ideology and lack of access to archival sources this is one episode of the Ngondo story which tends to be overlooked in the established historiography of the organization as well as the political analysis of the decolonization era.<sup>27</sup>

The earliest document of the Ngondo which I have been able to locate is a "Décision du Peuple" dated February 27, 1947.<sup>28</sup> It is no accident that the only written records of the circumstances surrounding this text are contained in reports of the French colonial Sûreté.<sup>29</sup> The French maintained a close watch over the Ngondo because they saw it as another instance of dissident Duala politics threatening their hold over Cameroon. The Duala founders of this new/revived organization apparently kept few records at this early, clandestine stage of their operations and later narratives skipped over their efforts in an apparent attempt to stress continuity with earlier events more suitable for creating the desired tradition.

All sources do agree that the key figure in creating the Ngondo of the 1940s was Alfred Ebelé Ekwalla (1890-1958), a man whose career illustrates the paradoxical politics of Duala elite identity during the colonial era.<sup>30</sup> Ekwalla began his public life as an apparently faithful servant of various colonial institutions, beginning with employment as a German government surveyor and continuing during the mandate period as an agent for the British mercantile firm of John Holt and an assessor in one of the Douala government courts. Ekwalla's first conflict with the French regime seems to have come about in 1940-41 when he was one of about seventy people arrested for allegedly pro-German sympathies. All available evidence suggests that the French suspicions had little basis; they mistook the social bonding of older Duala men around their common knowledge of German for political subversion (Derrick 1980). Most of those arrested (including Ekwalla and Pastor Lotin Samé) were, in fact, soon released. The persecution seems, however, to have fulfilled its own prophecy by turning Ekwalla (perhaps aided by the ideas of Lotin) into an underground political activist. The later Ngondo began life somewhere

27. Many of the government archival sources cited below are also found in FANKEM 1990, and I am grateful to him for pointing them out, although my own research has gone somewhat farther than his and drawn different conclusions.

28. Both the French translation and the not quite identical Duala text (none is signed) are held in the Archives de Léopold Moumé Étia (ALME), Deido, Douala.

29. See weekly Rapport de la Sûreté, 3-10 mai 1947, ANC/APA 10182; there are also citations to 1947 Ngondo documents—of which the originals could not be found—in the general report by the Sûreté director of Aug. 28, 1952, see P. Divol, "Le Ngondo" . . . , ANC, 2-AC 124/A (see ref. *supra* fn. 5).

30. Ekwalla's name is the only one at the bottom of the "Décision"; see also Rapports de la Sûreté (*passim*) and interviews in Douala with participants in the 1940s Ngondo: Richard Din Samé (July 14, 1991), Gaston Kingué Jong (July 12, 1911), Léopold Moumé Étia (July 8, 1991); the most detailed data on Ekwalla's career comes from an interview with his son, Dr Simon Eboko Ebelé (July 20, 1991).

around 1944-45 in series of night-time meetings, mainly across the (yet unbridged) Wouri river in the Bonaberi quarter of Douala.<sup>31</sup>

The clandestine phase of the 1940s Ngondo coincides with the end of World War II and various manifestations of anxiety by all residents of Douala about the changes which would now follow. The most dramatic of these events did not involve the Duala themselves but rather the white settler and immigrant African communities who clashed violently in a three-day confrontation late in September 1945. These riots were provoked in large part by a meeting of the reactionary European "États-Généraux de la Colonisation Française" held in Douala at the beginning of the same month (Joseph 1974b).

In the weeks between these two events several documents circulated in the Duala quarters of the city protesting alleged efforts to "sell the country." The immediate basis for this agitation appears harmless or even benevolent: requests by the colonial administration to send Africans to France for artisanal training and as elected political representatives. However, such initiatives seem to have been associated by local people with further losses of land, slave trading ("trafic d'indigènes"), and a general suspicion (probably connected with the aggressive settler posture) that nothing good could come from the undefined new juridical relationship between Cameroon and the metropole.<sup>32</sup>

Apart from the general tone of unrest, the main connection between the Ngondo and the sentiments expressed by the Duala agitators of September 1945 is a deep distrust of their own chiefs. Thus the first public statement by the Ngondo, the February 1947 "Décision", explicitly reminds "les chefs supérieurs . . . oublieux de leurs devoirs coutumiers de la procédure normale du règlement des affaires publiques de notre Collectivité, qui est de les soumettre à l'Assemblée Traditionnelle du Peuple, seule autorité compétente pour statuer valablement dans toutes les questions touchant l'ensemble du Peuple".<sup>33</sup>

The charter which follows this preamble consists of 41 articles stipulating in detail the composition as well as the legislative, executive and judicial procedures of the Ngondo. The institution itself is described as "datant de nos traditions les plus reculées" but little effort is made to anchor it in history. Indeed, the core articles appear under the heading "Réforme de

31. Interview with Din Samé (a participant in the meeting) and Dr Eboko Ebelé, who helped his father with French correspondence at this time.

32. See manifestos, posters and reports of a public meeting, Sept. 6, 1945, and letters to the administration in ANC/APA 10209/3. FANKEM (1990) reports general Duala beliefs that the 1945 agitation was organized by the Ngondo but the extensive documentation in this file and various Rappports de la Sûreté do not associate the Ngondo, or its then leaders, with either these events or a later memorandum of the Duala chiefs rejecting the proposed elections; for the memorandum, confused by JOSEPH (1977: 78-79) with the rather crude manifesto in the above file, see GOUTTELLAIN 1975: 316-317.

33. "Décision", p. 1, ALME, see ref. *supra* fn. 28.

l'Assemblée l'Adaptant au Temps Nouveau" and various points tacitly accept the sovereignty of "notre Gouvernement-Tuteur." However this phrase could not be very comforting to the French since the Ngondo also claimed the right to choose its own "tuteur" from among "toutes les nations de l'ONU".<sup>34</sup>

When the chiefs refused to sign the charter, Ekwalla wrote to the local colonial administration requesting that it break off all relations with them "jusqu'à ce que l'Assemblée Traditionnelle du Peuple statue sur leur sort et vous fixe sur la QUESTION".<sup>35</sup> Needless to say the administration did not comply and its surveillance of the Ngondo seems to have begun precisely at this point. However, instead of suppressing the organization and thus risking further agitation, the French appear to have brokered a reconciliation between the Ngondo and the chiefs. At a meeting on 17th August 1947, the first with a large attendance, the major Duala chiefs did finally sign up with the Assemblée.<sup>36</sup>

From this moment onward, the politics of the Ngondo underwent a major shift. Ekwalla remained for a short time as Secrétaire général but he gradually faded out of the picture in favor of the president of the organization, always a "chef supérieur", and from 1949 onwards, always Betoté Akwa.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, whether or not the chiefs affixed their names to the text of the original charter, the Ngondo now concerned itself less with the forms of Duala internal governance and more with substantive community interests not mentioned in the founding document.

During the era of its greatest visible political activity (1947-1956) the Ngondo dealt both with the national and international affairs of Cameroonian decolonization and with local questions concerning Douala and its region. These two spheres are not entirely separable but for present purposes I wish to concentrate on the latter. The ambivalent relationship of the Ngondo to such national parties as the Union des populations du Cameroun (UPC) have been well-covered in previous writings as have its petitions and delegations to France and the United Nations Trusteeship Council (Joseph 1977; Fankem 1990). Here the Ngondo functioned much like other ethnic blocs in pursuing general Cameroonian nationalist goals while assuring some place for Duala concerns and leadership in the new postcolonial order. Local politics, on the other hand, provide a better

34. Nta Lobé at the meeting of May 7, 1947, see P. Divol, "Le Ngondo" . . . , p. 5, ANC, 2-AC 124/A (see ref. *supra* fn. 5).

35. Ekwalla au Chef de Région du Wouri, March 9, 1947, see P. Divol, "Le Ngondo" . . . , pp. 4-5 (ref. *supra* fn. 5).

36. Rapports de la Sûreté, 16-23 août 1947, ANC/APA 10182; for evidence that the French authorities helped bring about this meeting, see P. Harter unpublished manuscript cited in GOUELLAIN 1975: 325.

37. Ekwalla's name is absent from a list of the Comité des Directeurs dated Jan. 3, 1950, ALME (see *supra* fn. 3); Ebelé Akwalla was particularly hostile to the Chef supérieur of his own Deïdo quarter, Ekwalla Éssaka, who now became vice-president of the Ngondo.

definition of these concerns and leadership and thus a more meaningful link to the historical and cultural dimensions of the Ngondo.

The local concerns of the Ngondo fall into three categories: landholding; inter-ethnic rivalry in the city of Douala; and internal rivalry among Duala elites. All these issues had specific political references in the decolonization era but their long-term common denominator is an attempt to define Duala identity in an effective form.

The earlier colonial experience of the Duala had made them particularly sensitive to the issue of landholding since urban real estate was their only remaining economic asset and one which had been attacked in various forms by both German and French modernization efforts. There was good reason to think that the new development plans of the postwar era would have similar consequences. The absence of any reference to land matters in the "Décision" of February 1947 may be due to the base of Ekwalla and his closest collaborators in Deido and Bonaberi, the two precolonial quarters of Douala which had been relatively undisturbed by Europeans. However, once the Akwa and Bell elites took over the Ngondo, land became a major concern: a commission was established to survey Duala holdings and regulations were passed forbidding any further sales to non-natives.<sup>38</sup>

In formal terms, Ngondo efforts to control land tenure failed entirely, as restrictions on real estate transactions could not be enforced and considerable land continued to be sold to outsiders.<sup>39</sup> However, in a more general sense the Ngondo's accentuation of land questions appears to have intensified consciousness of this issue within the Duala community and undoubtedly contributed to the effort by many individuals to hold on to their urban real property up to the present day.

Inter-ethnic politics would appear to provide the primary basis for the "invention" of the Ngondo. By the mid-1940s it had become obvious that the Duala were becoming a minority in their own city with the possible result of falling under the domination of other groups, particularly the very numerous and dynamic Bamiléké of the Cameroon Grassfields. The Ngondo could provide a means for organizing the Duala into a single and maximally defined group, for defending the status of their chefs supérieurs, and for combatting proposals to assimilate the city of Douala to the metropolitan model of a "commune de plein exercice", ruled by the majority of its citizens. All of these issues did concern the Ngondo, although there is

38. Report of Aug. 17, 1947 Ngondo meeting, *Rapports de la Sûreté*, 16-23 août 1947, ANC/APA 10182; see also a request "that non-Cameroonians should be forbidden to purchase land in the Territory", "Petition from the Ngondo, *Assemblée Traditionnelle du Peuple*, Douala, concerning the Cameroons under French and under British administration", United Nations Trusteeship Council, *Official Records*, Annex, Vol. II, Fourth Year, Sixth Session, 1949-1950, T/Pet/5/56-T/Pet/4/31, pp. 260-272.

39. Between 1950 and 1955 the Duala sold off almost 400 million/CFA worth of land (GOUFFAÏN 1975: 301-302).

some danger of exaggerating their significance and reducing the meaning of the institution itself to such narrow goals.<sup>40</sup>

In its effort to create an effective political base, the Ngondo offered a varying but always generous definition of its constituency, including not only the four major quarters of historical Douala (Bell, Akwa, Deido and Bonaberi) but also at various times the non-Duala cantons (chiefdoms) included in the same administrative unit as the city of Douala as well as the peoples of neighboring districts who share traditions of origin and Sawa (coastal) Bantu language use with the Duala. In political terms, none of this ever amounted to very much as there was no definition by which the Duala could compete demographically with the Bamiléké or even the Basaa of the adjoining southern forest region. It was these latter groups which dominated the regional political parties, including the UPC, with which the Ngondo and other Duala organizations affiliated during the decolonization era. But, as will be seen below, the relationship of the Ngondo to Duala identity transcends the realm of electoral politics.

The Ngondo did concentrate more consistently upon the issues of chiefly status and municipal government. Despite the shift in the population of Douala and the creation of five chiefdoms in the expanding "quartiers allogènes", the government of the city at the end of World War II still consisted of the French regional administrator and an advisory council consisting of four Europeans and the chefs supérieurs of Akwa and Bell. The Ngondo did not defend this arrangement but instead of demanding more democratic African representation, criticized the French for their system of "direct rule" through which traditional chiefs suffered "a decline in their prestige and authority" while "People who were of low social standing when they came to the Cameroons or Douala are promoted to the same rank as the dignitaries of the town . . .".<sup>41</sup>

This attack on the immigrant populations of Douala as well as the general demand for a British-type indirect rule system in Cameroon created a rift between the Duala chiefs and the most important Duala national politician, Paul Soppo Priso, who formally disassociated himself from the Ngondo's petition to the United Nations.<sup>42</sup> In his capacity as elected delegate to the Assemblée Représentative du Cameroun, Soppo Priso did, however, respond to pressure from the Ngondo and opposed the conversion of Douala to a "commune de plein or moyen exercice" which would assure political control by the majority non-Duala population.<sup>43</sup> In these maneuvers, the Ngondo was in tacit alliance with Douala European settlers, who

40. There is some such exaggeration in the otherwise very useful account of GARDINIER 1966.

41. "Petition from the Ngondo . . .", p. 262, see ref. *supra* fn. 38.

42. Soppo Priso to Ngondo, "Petition from the Ngondo . . .", p. 272, see ref. fn. 38.

43. GARDINIER 1966: 19-29; for Ngondo pressures on an apparently reluctant Soppo Priso concerning the commune reforms, see Rapports de la Sûreté, 3-12 avr., 17-24 avr. 1948, ANC/APA 10182.



also feared local government reforms, but there is no evidence of any conscious complicity between the two groups. Gardinier's assertion of such a link is based on an inaccurate assumption of serious economic conflicts between immigrant and indigenous communities in Douala.<sup>44</sup>

At the end of 1955 Douala finally became a "commune de plein exercice", so that Ngondo politics here achieved no more than a delaying action. However the reform—with its resultant loss of all privileged position by the Duala chefs supérieurs and their subjects—appears to have been accepted without any significant protest.

The most general political goal of the Ngondo, to provide a basis for political unity within the Duala community, was no more successfully met than its efforts regarding land legislation and municipal government. Soppo Priso represented the non-chiefly educated element among the Duala elite; his quarrels with the Ngondo indicate how difficult it was to reconcile ambitions for national leadership with the particularist interests represented by the Ngondo. Fortunately for Soppo the moment when he made his most serious bid for primacy in Cameroon came only in 1956, when the Ngondo ceased to be an autonomous political force (Joseph 1977: 156-158).

The other key Duala figure whom the Ngondo could never contain was Alexander Douala Manga Bell. As already noted, Douala Manga represented the alternative political myth to that of the Ngondo in his claims to inheritance of a single chiefdom encompassing all of the Duala and even, perhaps, all of Cameroon. For these reasons the French had not encouraged Douala Manga's accession to the position of chef supérieur of the Bell quarter, which was represented in the Ngondo (even in the brief role of president) by Alexander's rather tame uncle, Théodore Lobé Bell. At the same time as the Ngondo took form, Douala Manga parlayed his own mystique into a national political career initially even more splendid than that of Soppo Priso.

Douala Manga's position could not be reconciled with that of the Ngondo for opposite reasons than those of Soppo. The "Prince" was criticized by the Ngondo for accepting French citizenship, supporting French and settler interests at various moments of conflict and not taking a strong stand on the land question.<sup>45</sup> In 1948 Douala Manga made a brief stab at competing with the Ngondo by reviving the neo-traditional Muemba association which had supported him during the 1930s.<sup>46</sup> He finally replaced his

44. In a meeting on March 28, 1948, the Ngondo rejected the advances of the editor of the settler newspaper, *L'Éveil du Cameroun*, for a common policy on municipal reforms (Rapports de la Sûreté, 20-27 mars 1948, ANC/APA 10182); see criticism of Gardinier in Jost *op. cit.* 1977: 217.

45. MOUMI ÉLHA 1991: 68, 72-74, 90; the formative Ngondo meeting of Aug. 17, 1947 ruled that any Duala with French citizenship would lose all local property rights (Rapports de la Sûreté, 16-23 août 1947, ANC/APA 10182).

46. Rapports de la Sûreté, 20-27 mars 1948, ANC/APA 10182; the Muemba, origi-

uncle Lobé as the Bell chief in 1951, a change possibly engineered by the French to weaken the Ngondo. In any case, the result was a certain rift in the organization which now became identified mainly with Betoté Akwa and thus, while still politically active, unable to mobilize a significant Duala bloc, even in local elections.<sup>47</sup>

## The Ngondo as Vehicle of Tradition

The preceding discussion of the Ngondo's history and politics would seem to devaluate the act described at the very beginning of the present essay: Betoté Akwa's request for official recognition of the annual Ngondo celebration. Further examination of the way this festival and the various cultural aspects of the Ngondo were constructed also reveals a considerable degree of both explicit contrivance and implicit internal debate about the meaning of the entire institution. Yet it is precisely in this ambivalent celebration of the Ngondo as a commemorative event rather than as the functional institution being commemorated or revived that the tradition maintained itself after the late 1950s. In this form it has provoked a robust and flexible discourse for confronting Duala history and identity.

The 1949 "manifestation commémorative" to which Betoté Akwa refers was widely recognized as a major success for the organization. Indeed, in popular memory, this date marks the beginning of the "new" Ngondo (Doumbé Moulongo 1972: 13, 31; Soullillou 1982: 88). Surviving documents, however, reveal not only the extensive political history which preceded and surrounded the 1949 celebration (it was followed shortly by the Ngondo's petition to the United Nations) but also the self-conscious manner in which history and "coutume" were organized as elements of this effort.<sup>48</sup> The result is a tradition which has taken strong hold upon Duala self-conception while at the same time producing continuous ambiguity about the very term "Ngondo", the appropriate date for the festival, and the significance of its link to the rituals of the local water spirit, *jengu*.

---

nally a mutual-help association of men belonging to the same age-class, took on a broader role during the inter-war period (DERRICK 1989: 115-119).

47. In the elections of the Assemblée territoriale du Cameroun, the Ngondo candidates received only 173 votes against 5,418 for Soppo Priso; in a later election for the French National Assembly, the Ngondo candidate Moumé Étia received only 243 out of 8,230 votes; see P. Divol, "*Le Ngondo*" . . . , pp. 12-13 (see ref. *supra* fn. 5).
48. See committee on "histoire" in Ngondo meeting of June 2, 1948 (ALME, see fn. 3), and one for "coutume" in the meeting of March 30, 1953 (Gaston Kingue Jong Papers, Douala); HARTER (1968: 83) gives a lengthy account of the deliberation preceding the 1949 festival.

The indigenous name of the *Assemblée Traditionnelle* does not appear in the French text of the "Décision" of February 1947,<sup>49</sup> nor in any of *Rapports de la Sûreté* before August 1947. In most of the subsequent historical accounts, Ngondo is given an etymology in the term *ngondi*, derived from one of the inland, Duala-related languages and translated as "placenta", thus implying the kinship of those represented in the body. The other and more immediate source for this name is geographical, referring to either the brook running between Akwa and Bell or the sand bank at its outlet in the Wouri river.<sup>50</sup> Whether or not one accepts the orthodox view that the place name derived from the site of the *Assemblée*, the association with the division between the two main Duala chieftaincies and the 1876 execution of Eyum Ebelé/Charley Deido is clearly evoked and with them the central themes of Duala political history, however interpreted.

Once the Ngondo determined to organize a public festival, the most obvious question to be debated was the date. The original choice, June 19, seems to have been arbitrary, although subsequent Akwa sources insist it was the day on which their founding chief, Ngando a Kwa, first established the Ngondo. In 1959 the date was changed to July 12 to commemorate the signing of the treaty of protection with Germany, clearly an historical event but one whose association with "tradition" seems almost to have been plotted by post-modernists! However, in 1972 a decision was made to switch the festival again, this time to early December "à l'époque où il se manifestait originellement, soit à l'aube de chaque année".<sup>51</sup> This last choice may seem the most contrived of all given its assumptions of a precolonial celebration which coincides with the European/Christian holiday calendar, but it does make both practical and symbolic sense for the Duala. June and especially July, when the festival was previously held, are well into the season of heavy rains on the West African coast and thus not very suitable times for outdoor celebrations. Moreover, it appears the precolonial Duala recognized this fact by staging public rituals during the most pleasant part of the year, which does begin around December.<sup>52</sup>

As developed from 1949 onwards, the Ngondo festival was to be simultaneously a ritual, a popular and a political event (Harter 1968: 83). Of

49. It does appear in the Duala version of the, "Éyot'a dimbambe ya Bato ba Duala na Manyango mao" (Charte traditionnelle de la Confédération du Peuple Douala), ALME (see fn. 3); but this text, without date or place for signatures, may well be later than the French text (ALME, see fn. 3).

50. Léopold Moumé Étia (interview, Douala, July 9, 1991) has tried to combine the two derivations through the phrase *ngondi à nya mukoko* (literally "sand placenta", i.e. sand bank). This explanation is particularly appealing because in both historical and contemporary usage the brook in question is often given the same name as the former central market: Besseké.

51. Speech by the Secrétaire général du Ngondo, Richard Din Samé, July 1972 (ALME, see fn. 3).

52. See, *inter alia*, "ngando a mbu" [no etymological link to Ngondo], in FETMAN 1953: 48; EBDING 1959: 305).

these three dimensions it is the ritual which draws most deeply upon the culture of the Duala and other coastal Cameroonians through its evocation of the *Jengu* cult.

*Miengu* (sing. *jengu*) spirits are believed to inhabit both the ocean and the inland waterways of the Cameroon littoral region. Beliefs about them, as with *Mamy Wata* figures throughout West Africa, are rich and complex but the main practices which they currently inspire are cults of affliction which reach even to communities who have no contact with aquatic life.<sup>53</sup> In the Ngondo celebration, however, the *jengu* is treated as a general guardian of natural forces through whom the welfare of the community can be protected. This part of the festival is controlled by a group of ritual specialists from the rather isolated Duala community on the island of Jebalé in the Wouri river. On the night before the public celebration a secret ceremony is enacted at Jebalé and its surrounding waters in which various sacrifices (including living animals) are made to the water spirit and a container of further gifts is prepared for presentation near one of the main Duala beaches on the next day. In the daytime ceremony, this container is given to the *jengu* in the names of the major Duala chiefs as leaders of the Ngondo; but it is the Jebalé specialists who bring the offering to the chiefs and then carry it underwater to the spirit.<sup>54</sup>

Although the 1936 Lotin Samé account of the "Assemblée Générale du Peuple" linked its judicial function to the *Jengu* cult, the traditions related after World War II do not generally draw such close connections between the ritual and political aspects of the Ngondo. The *Jengu* cult is treated instead as an important aspect of local tradition which should be included in any celebration of the Duala past. *Jengu* beliefs and rituals, while hardly fixed through time, are nevertheless immune from the charge of being "invented" traditions. It is rather their juxtaposition with specific claims about history which has—quite openly—been devised for modern purposes. But because the *Jengu* cult has a life and even a history of its own, and one which is well-known to participants, its role in the Ngondo festival cannot simply be one of "legitimizing" the orthodox Ngondo tradition. Instead, it raises, for both outside observers and the participants themselves, a series of critical questions about cultural identity.

The first of these questions rises from the domination of the Ngondo *Jengu* ceremonies by the people of Jebalé, whose role in Duala economic and political life is otherwise quite marginal. The most immediate explanation for this situation is that the Jebalé people are also seen as central to the ongoing healing cults associated with *Jengu*. The other great coastal center of *Jengu* practices is Kribi, a relatively small community consider-

53. IITMAN 1957; BUREAU 1962: 105-138; E. ARDENER 1972; ROSNY 1985; and my fieldwork (Kribi, Cameroon, July 1991).

54. HARTER (1968 83-93) provides the best of several published descriptions; and I witnessed the public ceremony myself in 1973.

ably south of Douala. What Jebalé and Kribi have in common beside *Jengu* cults is their continued concentration on fishing as a major source of livelihood in contrast to the middleman trade which made the fortunes of the major Duala groups in the two centuries preceding colonial annexation.<sup>55</sup> Fishing and water spirits are, of course, closely connected and one may thus see the *Jengu* specialists as the coastal equivalents of "earth priests" in other African societies, i.e. as politically and economically subordinated autochthonous groups who nonetheless retain a privileged relationship with the primal forces of the environment.

The foregoing explanation would be adequate if the *Jengu* cult had always been as remote from politics as it is today. However, in the nineteenth century it was one among a whole set of *losango* (sing. *isango*) cult organizations which could be mobilized for political and judicial purposes.<sup>56</sup> The precolonial *losango* were numerous and probably unstable (note their competitive use in the Eyum Ebelé case cited above but *Jengu* does appear to have maintained a prominent, even dominant, role among them. The *losango* sometimes acted as law enforcement bodies and to some extent cut across the lineage-defined segments of the Duala polity. However, their function as integrating institutions was limited by their emphasis on differentiation of other kinds based upon age, wealth, gender but above all the status of *wonja* (freeborn Duala) vs *bakom* (literally, slaves, but functionally any non-*wonja*). Here the association of *Jengu* with fishing does articulate with the hierarchy of the precolonial trading system. Rather than autochtones, the *Jengu* people are now an elite community whose aquatic skills have allowed them to master both the aboriginal Basaa cultivator populations of their coastal environment and all the interior peoples with whom they trade on a privileged basis. *Jengu* and other *losango* were never used, as was the leopard *Ekpé* cult in the neighboring Cross River region, to form links between the Duala and inland commercial partners. It even appears that for certain periods the Akwa were not allowed by the Bells to belong to *Jengu* because of their alleged *bakom* (i.e. Basaa) descent (Thormählen 1884: 333). More openly, conflicts between slaves (probably a majority of the precolonial Douala population) and their Duala masters were fought out in the nineteenth century via competing *losango*.

This divisive dimension of the *Jengu* cult is both suppressed and emphasized by the Ngondo festival. The celebrations on the beach includes references to other *losango* and an effort is made to include not only Duala of every origin but all the Sawa Bantu-speaking peoples of the

55. The Pidgin term for the Jebalé ruler was "King Fish" (see the Treaty between "Jeberret" ruler and German trading firms, July 15, 1884, p. 92, Reichskolonialamt File 4202, Deutsches Zentralarchiv, Postdam).

56. There is no satisfactory account of *losango*, but see WURM 1904; AUSTEN 1977a; also *supra* pp. 289-290, and fn. 13.

hinterland.<sup>57</sup> On the other hand, at the high point of the immersion of the *Jengu* gift, the assemblage cries out a phrase in the secret language of the *Jengu* cult which at least some of the participants understand quite clearly to be a declaration that only *wonja* are allowed to be present.

Perhaps the most profound question raised by the inclusion of this public *Jengu* ritual in the Ngondo festival is that of the authenticity of the entire undertaking. In one sense, the sacrifice is the most meaningful part of the entire Ngondo, as it engages the participants in a set of beliefs and practices which have played and continue to play a powerful role in local life. At the same time it is clear that the public use of *Jengu* as an emblem of social and political unity contradicts its historical and contemporary role which has generally been secretive and divisive. *Jengu* rituals of the precolonial and colonial past were incorporated into other public and collective Duala events, including the triennial arrival of *mbea-toe* crustaceans in the Wouri, the end of the rainy season, the canoe races held on colonial and national holidays and rites to ward off epidemics (Ebding 1959: 305; Harter: 1966; Rosny 1990). But on all these occasions there is a specific connection between ongoing *Jengu* beliefs and the issues being addressed (fishing, fertility, canoe prowess, disease) with no pretense of promoting political unity.

The linking of chieftdom and the *Jengu* cult in the Ngondo festival represents the kind of relationship between political power and ritual performance which one might imagine if the precolonial Duala had actually developed a centralized state of some kind. Even where such rituals exist, as in the much-studied Zulu-Swazi *Ncwala* (first fruits festival), they are full of ironies and internal contradictions.<sup>58</sup> The fact that the Duala version of this event did not come into existence until after colonialism and its attendant developments had removed any possibility of a substantive Duala polity only adds another level of irony to the classic formula. In more historically realized African states rituals of this kind reflect upon the ambiguous relationship between public power and domestic social reproduction (Kelly 1982; Austen 1993). The Ngondo speaks to the no less profound tensions between wealth and reproduction: the precolonial Duala controlled trade in the Cameroon littoral region but were also known for the sterility of their women and thus became demographically as well as economically dependent upon the migration to the coast of ultimately inassimilable (and by the late 1950s, politically dominant) *bakom*.

\*

57. The official name for the (re)revived 1991 festival was "Ngond'a Sawa".

58. For a review of the extensive literature, see LINCOLN 1987, and various responses in *Man* XXXIII (1988): 375-379.

The goal of this essay has been both to point out contradictions in the Ngondo tradition and to demonstrate the seriousness with which it evokes Duala history and culture. The main casualty of such an undertaking is not the tradition as such but its use to promote an idealized image of the inherited past, one characterized by political unity and social harmony. The only way for any community to develop an identity which is both rooted in the past and viable for the present is to cultivate a capacity for combining the engagement of celebration with the detachment of contemplation.

It is of course easier for an outsider than for a Duala to detach himself from the historical context which produced the Ngondo tradition and use it to consider a much longer history. It is also pretentious for a researcher who does not have the linguistic and other capacities to pursue fully the issues surrounding the Ngondo to claim that he can resolve the scholarly and cultural dilemmas raised by such a tradition. Indeed, this article may be read by many of my Cameroonian colleagues and collaborators as a provocation. It is intended as such only in the spirit of all intellectual exchange and I sincerely hope it is not the last word on the subject.

*University of Chicago, 1992.*

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

AMSELLE, J.-L.

1990 *Logiques métisses: anthropologie de l'identité en Afrique et ailleurs* (Paris: Payot).

ARDENER, S.

1968 *Eyewitnesses to the Annexation of Cameroon* (Buea, Cameroun: Ministry of Primary Education).

1972 "Beliefs and the Problem of Women", in J. S. LA FONTAINE, ed., *The Interpretation of Ritual* (London: Tavistock): 145-153.

AUSTEN, R. A.

1977a "Duala vs. Germans in Cameroon: Economic Dimensions of a Political Conflict", *Revue française d'Histoire d'Outre-Mer* LXIV (4): 477-497.

1977b "Slavery among Coastal Middlemen: The Duala of Cameroon", in S. MIERS & I. KOPYTOFF, eds., *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives* (Madison: University of Wisconsin): 305-333.

1983 "The Metamorphoses of Middlemen: The Duala Europeans and the Cameroon Hinterland, ca. 1800-ca. 1960", *International Journal of African Historical Studies* XVI (1): 1-24.

- 1986 "Cameroon and Cameroonians in Wilhelmian *Innerpolitik*: La Grande Histoire et la Petite Histoire", in KUM'A NDUMBE III, ed., *L'Afrique et l'Allemagne: de la colonisation à la coopération, 1884-1986. (Le cas du Cameroun)* (Yaoundé: Éd. Africavenir: 204-226).
- 1987 *African Economic History: Internal Development and External Dependency* (London: J. Currey).
- 1993 "The Moral Economy of Witchcraft: An Essay in Comparative History", in J. & J. L. COMAROFF, eds, *Modernization and its Malcontents* (Chicago: University of Chicago): fthcg.
- AUSTEN, R. A. & DERRICK, J.  
fthcg *Middlemen and the Cameroons: The Duala and their Hinterland, c. 1600-c. 1960*.
- BALANDIER, G.  
1975 "Économie, société et pouvoir chez les Duala anciens", *Cahiers d'Études africaines* XV (3), 59: 361-380.
- BRUTSCH, J.-R.  
1955 "Les traités camerounais. Recueillis traduits et commentés", *Études camerounaises* 43-44: 9-42.
- BUREAU, R.  
1962 *Ethno-sociologie religieuse des Duala et apparentés* (Yaoundé: Institut de recherches scientifiques du Cameroun).
- DERRICK, J.  
1979 *Douala under the French Mandate, 1916 to 1936* (London: University of London, Ph. D. dissertation), mimeo.  
1980 "Free French and Africans in Douala", *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* X (2): 53-70.  
1989 "Colonial Elitism in Cameroon: The Duala in the 1930s", in M. NJEUMA, ed., *Introduction to the History of Cameroon in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (London: Macmillan): 115-118
- DIKE, K. O.  
1956 *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta, 1830-1885* (Oxford: Clarendon).
- DOUMBÉ MOULANGO, M.  
1972 *Le Ngondo: assemblée traditionnelle du peuple Duala* (Yaoundé: Centre d'édition de l'enseignement).
- EBDING, F.  
1959 *Duala Sprichwörter* (Freiburg: Anthropos-Institut) ("Micro-Bibliotheca" 31), microfilm.
- ECKERT, A.  
1991 *Die Duala und die Kolonialmächte* (Hamburg: Hamburg Universität).
- FANKEM, R.  
1990 *Le rôle du Ngondo dans la décolonisation du Cameroun* (Yaoundé: École normale supérieure, mémoire de maîtrise), mimeo.  
1966 *Political Behavior in the Community of Douala, Cameroon. Reactions of the Duala people to Loss of Hegemony, 1944-1955* (Athens: Ohio University) ("Papers in International Studies" 3).



GARDINIER, D.

1966 *Political Behavior in the Community of Douala, Cameroon. Reactions of the Duala People to Loss of Hegemony, 1944-1955* (Athens: Ohio University) ("Papers in International Studies" 3).

GOUELLAIN, R.

1975 *Douala, ville et histoire* (Paris: Institut d'ethnologie).

HARTER, P.

1966 "Les courses de pirogues coutumières chez les Dualas", *Bulletin de l'Association française pour les Recherches et Études camerounaises* II: 31-47.

1968 "Le Ngondo", *Bulletin de l'Association française pour les Recherches et Études camerounaises* III: 59-97.

HOBBSBAWM, E. & RANGER, T., eds

1983 *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

ITTMANN, J.

1953 *Volkskundliche und religiöse Begriffe im nordlichen Waldland von Kamerun* (Berlin: D. Reimer).

1957 "Der kultischer Geheimbund Djengu an der Kameruner Küste", *Anthropos* LII: 135-176.

JAECK, H.-P.

1960 "Die deutsche Annexation", in H. STOECKER, ed., *Kamerun unter deutscher Kolonialherrschaft*, Vol. I (E. Berlin: Rütten & Loening): 29-95.

JONES, G. I.

1961 *Trading States of the Oil Rivers: A Study of Political Development in Eastern Nigeria* (London: Oxford University Press).

JOSEPH, R. A.

1974a "The Royal Pretender: Prince Douala Manga Bell in Paris, 1919-1922", *Cahiers d'Études africaines* XIV (2), 54: 339-358.

1974b "Settlers, Strikers and *Sans-Travail*: The Douala Riots of September 1945", *Journal of African History* XV (4): 669-687.

1977 *Radical Nationalism in Cameroun* (Clarendon: Oxford University Press).

1980 "Church, State and Society in Colonial Cameroon", *International Journal of African Historical Studies* XIII (1): 20-31.

KELLY J.

1982 *Mongol Conquest and Zulu Terror: An Analysis of Cultural Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago, M.A. dissertation), mimeo.

LINCOLN, B.

1987 "Ritual, Rebellion, Resistance: Once more the Swazi Newala", *Man* XXII: 132-56.

MOUMÉ ÉTIA, L.

1991 *Cameroun: les années ardentes* (Paris: Jalivres).

MUDIMBE, V. Y.

1988 *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University).

NDOUMBÉ NDOUMBÉ, P

1991 "Bref aperçu sur l'origine des Duala", *Special Infos Ngondo* (Douala): 8-9, 12.

RANGER, T.

1983 "The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa", in E. HOBBSAWM & T. RANGER, eds, *The Invention . . .* : 211-262.

ROSNY, E. de

1985 *Healers in the Night* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis).

1990 "La lutte contre le choléra à Jébalé (Cameroun)", in S. DEVERS, ed., *Pour Jean Malaurie* (Paris: Plon): 635-645.

RÜGER, A.

1968 "Die Duala und der Kolonialmacht, 1884-1914. Eine Studie über die historische Ursprünge des afrikanischen antikolonialismus", in H. STOECKER, ed., *Kamerun unter deutscher Kolonialherrschaft*, Vol. II (Berlin: Deutscher Verlag der Wissenschaften): 181-257.

SOULHILLOU, J.

1982 *Douala: un siècle en images* (Paris: Chez l'Auteur).

THORMÄHLEN, J.

1884 "Mitteilungen über Land und Leute in Kamerun", *Mitteilungen des Geographischen Gesellschaft in Hamburg*: 328-334.

VANSINA, J.

1983 "The Peoples of the Forest", in D. BIRMINGHAM & P. MARTIN, eds, *History of Central Africa*, Vol. I (London: Longman): 79-83.

WIRZ, A.

1973 "La 'rivière de Cameroun': commerce précolonial et contrôle de pouvoir en société lignagère", *Revue française d'Histoire d'Outre-Mer* LX (2): 170-195.

WURM, P.

1904 *Die Religion der Küstenstämme in Kamerun* (Basel: Basel Mission Society).