



Reenactment of a Myth

The Fon of Oku Visits Lake Mawes (Cameroon)

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Abstract. – The myth of the famous crater Lake Mawes is not only “told” in Oku, a small kingdom in the centre of the Western Grassfields of Cameroon. About two years after the enthronement of a new Fon (king) the myth is “reenacted.” After a critical examination of one version of the myth, the author describes the royal ritual of the circumambulation of the lake by the Fon and the ritual invocations, which accompany the five sacrifices to the “gods of the lake” and culminate in the throwing of a living ram into the lake. [*Cameroon, Western Grassfields, Oku kingdom, myth of Lake Mawes, royal ritual*]

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Introduction

Lake Mawes or Lake Oku is one of more than 30 crater lakes in the heart of the Cameroon Grassfields. It came into existence through the result of volcanic activity and lies on the so-called Cameroon Line, a volcanic chain stretching from the Atlantic Ocean island Annobón to the mountainous highlands of the Cameroon Grassfields. Geologically it is still very young emerging from a volcanic birth within the past few centuries (Stager 1987: 409). Lake Mawes (Fig. 1) is only 52 m deep but it has a large area and a volume of 2.270 million cubic metres (Freeth 1992: 52). It is one of the highest

volcanic lakes in the Cameroon Grassfields, lying at an altitude of 2.208 m (Hassert 1917: 142).¹

The first European to reach the lake was the German Captain Glauning. On 25 August 1905,² he set out from Bamenda on a military expedition, which took him to Babungo,³ hence to Lake Mawes, Elak, and Djottin. From there he continued to Dumbo, Buku, and Kentu (now in Nigeria). He returned to Bamenda via Esu, We, Wum, Kuk, Mmen (Baf-meng), and Kijem (Babanki) (Moisel 1913: 3). It was on this occasion that Mkong Ndako, the then Fon⁴ of Oku (d. 1908), a small kingdom located in the centre of the Cameroon Grassfields, went to meet Captain Glauning at obkiim, just below the Oku Palace, dressed like a woman and carrying a field-basket (*kensoy*) and a hoe. Fon Mkong Ndako wanted to show the Germans that Oku people were a peaceloving people and that they would work for the Germans (Glauning 1906). As a result Oku was spared the casualties suffered by Nso’ the following year. The second European to reach Lake Mawes was Prof. Dr. Curt Hassert. He came from

- 1 Lake Nyos, in comparison, the “killer lake” in the Cameroon Grassfields, about 30 km NNW of Lake Oku, which erupted on August 21, 1986, killing more than 1.700 people, lies at an altitude of 1.075 m (Hassert 1917: 142).
- 2 This was prior to the punitive expedition of the Germans against Nso’ in 1906.
- 3 Babungo had welcomed Eugen Zintgraff, the first German explorer in 1889. Babungo continued to be on good terms with the Germans who established a road-making camp there.
- 4 Fon is the common name for “king” or “chief” in the Western Grassfields of Cameroon. In Oku the Fon is called *obfon*.



Fig. 1: View of crater lake Mawes.

the direction of Djottin (Moisel 1913: 5) and spent three days at the lake, from 31 May to 2 June 1908 (Hassert 1917: 142), making a number of scientific experiments and taking measurements of altitude, temperature, etc.

The Myth

The myth of Lake Mawes of which several versions exist tells of the origin of the lake and how the lake came into possession of the Fon of Oku. The earliest version published is the one by Father Johannes Emonts S. C. J. (1927: 155f.) in which the opponent of the Fon of Oku contesting the ownership of the lake is the Fon of Babungo. In the following I reproduce the version the anthropologist Dr. Phyllis Kaberry was told by Fon Sintieh I on 28 August 1960, Mr. Samuel Ngum⁵ interpreting. Other versions can be found in Keming et al. (1986), Chilver (1991), Davis (1991), Shanklin (1992), Argenti (1996: 17–19), Bah (2000: 2f.), and Yenshu Vubo (2001: 20f.). Mbutwe-Samba (1998: 33–36) gives an English translation of Fr. Emonts' version and an (edited) version of Kaberry; and Koloss (2000: 33–35) gives the version of Emonts (English translation) and also includes the version of Peter G. Nying (1977).

A certain person, Mawes, came from Ake side. He reported to the chief of Babanki Kijem⁶ – at that time Kijem people lived near the present lake. Mawes' hair was bushy: he asked the chief of Kijem to shave him.

This the chief refused. Mawes left and came to the Fon of Oku who received him well, gave him food, washed him, and gave him a place to stay. After a time Mawes wanted his own place and asked for a site. The Fon gave him the place called Kitshale (Kechiale)⁷ – but Mawes said there was no place for a palace. The Fon showed him ITO which is now in the valley. Mawes said there was not enough land for farming. Then the Fon said he should choose his own place. He chose the top of a hill where Kijem were living – the Fon agreed to this. So Mawes went, and young girls and boys were told to provide food for him. Mawes told them to do this. Some gave, some did not.

Mawes told those who gave that when rain fell they should get their children to the top of the hill, Ndong Mawes. He told those who did not give that they could dance in the rain and pick up tadpoles (*iyi* [eyghiy]). Then Mawes came to Oku palace and asked for two *chindas* (members of Kwifon – *nchiyse ndaa*) to go to the site. The Fon gave them. Then Mawes told them that he would shoot a spear and that they were to go where the spear fell. The *chindas* followed the spear and found a deer. Mawes told them that they were for a meal and return[ed] home. Then Mawes reached Kijem. Rain began to fall. Those who had given food got their young children together and went to the top of the hill. Those who had refused to give food went on dancing. The rain continued, a flood began, which continued until it covered houses and people and even the chief of Kijem. The mothers came in from the farms. They did not find their children and called out for them. The mothers whose children answered from above went up the hill. Those who did not find their children became angry and fell into the flood. The flood became a lake. The Kijem who had not been drowned made houses by the side of the lake and had a new chief.

Later they decided to find out whether the lake belonged to Oku or Kijem. A day was fixed. Kijem came with his own side, Oku with the Fon. They – the two chiefs – went into the lake and there they met the god of the lake, Mawes, and put the case to him. Kijem lost it and the head of the Kijem chief was cut off. The Oku chief was shown three times by Mawes where the Kijem chief had entered the lake. So the Kijem people thought it was their chief being shown, and the Oku people that their chief had been killed. The reason for this was that the Oku chief had been in rags when he entered the lake. But the chief which Mawes would send back to the people would be given a new cloth by the god and a cap called *finanemboj* [*fenan ə mboj*] (it has white feathers, a crocheted crown, and band). The chief was given to the people who rejoiced. The Kijem people cried: some drowned. Those left went to their present site. The Lake became Oku (Kaberry 1960: 24–26).

The first thing, which strikes one in this version, is that Mawes is male. The opinions among the Oku

5 Mr. Ngum Samuel Nsakse succeeded Fon Sintieh I in 1992 as Fon Ngum III.

6 There are different spellings of Kijem (Babanki, Babanki Tungo) in the published literature: Kijem, Kejem, Kedjom, Këjem.

7 This is a place below the Fon's Palace now occupied by Ngele, the Princes' society.

people as to whether Mawes is male or female are divided. Mawes is usually translated as “our Ma” or “our mother,” implying that Mawes is a goddess.⁸ In the versions of the myth given by Emonts (1927), Nying (1977), and Keming et al. (1986), Mawes is a male deity.⁹ It is true, as Krauß (1990: 296) correctly points out, the word for mother in the Oku language is *no*, not *ma*. But it should also be noted that “Má” (with a high tone) is a female personal name.¹⁰ Faay Kayan, the chief of Manchok, one of my trusted informants, told me that Mawes was a woman, but when she first appeared in Oku she came disguised as a man and that is the reason why many people believe Mawes to be a man. Her matted hair was a clear indication that she was a woman. In most versions it is only in the second part of the myth that Ma, who appears as a stranger, is identified as a “god.” At the stranger’s death his/her spirit double enters the lake (Chilver 1991: 18) and he/she becomes the “god of the lake,” but without indicating the gender. As Koloss (2000: 33) mentions, “a distinction as to the gender of deities is generally not made in Oku.” The belief that lakes and deep river pools are inhabited by powerful beings seems to be widespread throughout the Grassfields (Chilver 1991: 18).

The myth is clearly divided into two parts. The first part tells of the origin of the lake, how the lake came into being. As we have seen, the birth of the lake through volcanic activity happened only in the last few centuries (Stager 1987: 409). The Oku people have their own belief of how the lake came into existence. Their belief is expressed in form of a myth, the myth of Lake Mawes. This myth may well contain memories of a natural disaster, the violent birth of the crater lake, or a gas eruption, still lingering in oral traditions. The second part tells how Lake Mawes came to be owned by Oku. It is this second part that the royal ritual of circling the lake reenacts.

The antagonists in the dispute over the ownership¹¹ of the lake in the second part of the myth vary in the different versions. In Fr. Emonts’ version they are the Fon of Babungo and the Fon of Oku. Mbunwe-Samba (1998: 34) wonders whether this reflects the fact that before 1900 Oku was placed by the Germans, for forced labour purposes, un-

der Babungo. But on Moisel’s map (Moisel 1913, based on 1902 information by Strümpell) Oku is again shown as “independent” (Chilver in Bah 1996: 18). In the version given by Argenti (1996) the opponent of the Fon of Oku is the Fon of Kom and in yet another version (Davis 1991) it is the leader of the Ntul, the original inhabitants of Oku. But in most versions the dispute about the ownership of the lake was between the Fon of Kijem and the Fon of Oku. There is a strong oral tradition in Babanki (Kijem) that a long time ago the Kijem people were settled in Oku (Shanklin 1992; Yenshu Vubo 2001) before they moved to their present place. It is also significant that in Oku, below Lake Mawes, there is a village called Jikijem, which literally means “road to Kijem.” Bah states that “the present Fons of Kejem Keko (Kejem of Oku) and Kejem Ketungo (Kejem of stone top) are said to reiterate that their people migrated from the direction of Oku to eventually found these chiefdoms” (Bah 2004: 53). These traditions clearly favour the version that the Fon of Kijem and the Fon of Oku were the two contenders for the possession of the lake.

The Royal Ritual¹²

Preparation at the Palace

On Thursday (*əbkwey*), 10 April 2008, the day before Fon Sintieh II went to Lake Mawes he came to the *kebuk kedia*, the passage between the Kwifon compound and the Fon’s section of the Palace, at about four o’clock in the afternoon. With bare upper body and wearing the two pieces of cloth of the traditional gown, which are tied around the waist like an apron in front and at the back, he sat down on an iron folding chair covered with a cloth. Present were Shufaay Nsaanen, Tanto Tongle, an old *nchiy ntok* from Ngashie, Nkemba, and Ngwang, one of the newly recruited Kwifon members. I was also invited to attend the ritual. Fon Sintieh II took the two “prayer woods” called *əmkan*¹³ which are believed to have apotropaic properties. He placed the male part called *fenkan* on top and began to scrape it with an old Oku knife. While scraping it he made a long invocation. He first called on all the past Fons (“my fathers”) and especially Mkong Mote, the legendary Fon of Oku who is now regarded as one of the gods of Oku and

8 Koloss (2000); Bah (2000); Argenti (1996).

9 In Shanklin (1992) the stranger who comes to beg for land to build his compound is a (male) “witch” and has no name.

10 “Mäh” (with a low tone) is a male personal name.

11 According to Chilver (1991: 18), “a quarrel over access to a lake or pool is a frequent theme in Grassfields oral tradition: what is involved, most probably, is not access to water *per se* but to the monopolization of powers associated with it.”

12 Njakoi John Bah has published a short, firsthand account of the royal ritual of circling the lake by Fon Ngum III in 1994 (Bah 2004: 51–58).

13 For an illustration of the *əmkan* “prayer wood” see Koloss (2000: 61).

who has his second grave in Lumeto, a clearing in the forest on the slope of Mount Kilum. The Fon informed them that the following day he was going to the lake. They should all come and join him and give him a safe journey to the lake and back. He told Mkong Mote that he was sending two *nchiyse ntok* with palm wine and a ram (*keyak*) which was going to be sacrificed to the god of the lake. The rest of the invocation followed the usual pattern. The Fon was begging for a good harvest and enough food for the people to eat. He prayed that the people should have many children including twins and triplets. He asked for schools, colleges, and hospitals and any other thing which helps the country to develop.¹⁴ He begged that the schoolchildren and students should do well in their studies and exams and that Oku should live in peace and be left in peace,¹⁵ etc. When the Fon had finished this first part of the invocation he changed the two pieces of wood taking the one below and putting it on top. This second piece of wood is called *ηkuf*, considered to be the female part. Scraping it the Fon addressed it as if it were a person. He asked *ηkuf* that, as it sees everything and does not favour any person, it should drive out and destroy all persons who come with evil intent and are out to harm Oku.

At the end of the invocation, the Fon knocked off the dust into his left palm and with the right index finger he pushed it through the spout of a special calabash (*əbsek*) used for sacrificial purposes. Then he threw the two pieces of wood on the ground for an omen. The first throw was negative, the two pieces lying face up on the ground. He picked the two pieces up again and after mumbling something to himself he threw them again. This time they fell one face down and the other face up, a good omen.

After the Fon had inserted a peace plant (*ηkej*) into the spout of the small sacrificial calabash, he put it into a raffia bag (*ketuu kebam*) and gave it to Tanto Tongle. He carried the bag over his shoulder suspended from a short bamboo pole and Ngwang took the ram. Then they set out for Lumeto. There Tanto, after clapping his hands in front of Mkong Mote's grave hut, hung the bag with the calabash on a peg on the outside wall of the hut. Ngwang tied the ram to the corner of the hut. Early next morning, Ngwang went back to take the ram to the

lake. The palm wine remained there till Sunday, two days after the Fon's circumambulation of the lake, when Tanto came to take it back to the Palace to the "House of Ntəl" where it was consumed.

Preparations before the Circumambulation of the Lake

Friday (*əbkuotuwi*), 11 April 2008, was the day when the newly installed Fon of Oku – Sintieh II was "held" Fon on 3 April 2006 – made his obligatory visit to Lake Mawes, the reenactment of the taking possession of the lake according to the foundation myth. This always takes place about two years after the installation of a new Fon. Several thousand people came to witness the "royal ritual" as the Fon circled the lake. I had been told of the forthcoming event early enough, so I was able to participate. It was an interesting experience but also very exhausting. Unlike previous times (mentioned by the Fon in his invocations) the Fon, his wives, and attendants went to the lake by car. Formerly, they started out from the Palace at 5 a.m., trekking down to Tolon, and then up to the lake, a distance of about 13 km.

I left the house before six and went down to the Kwifon¹⁶ compound where Shufaay Nsaanen of Mbam, who comes second to the Fon in the Oku hierarchy, Faay Kayan of Manchok, Nkemba, and a number of other Kwifon members were already waiting for me. We left the Kwifon compound just after six. After Kesotin, the last village before the lake, we passed hundreds of people walking up towards the forest. We left the car on the brink of the crater near the Baptist rest house.¹⁷ The lake, surrounded on all sides by dense mountain forest, lay at our feet. Its surface glistened in the dim haze of the morning light. From the edge of the crater the footpath drops down steeply about fifty meters before it levels out towards the lake. We arrived at the lake about an hour before the Fon and his "entourage." Many people were already gathered near the "ceremonial grounds," a level area about 50 metres away from the shore of the lake. It was covered with saplings, shrubs, and thick undergrowth. Shufaay Nsaanen gave orders to all men with cutlasses to start clearing the area. At its lower side, in front of a large tree, was a circle demarcated by some peace plants (*ηkej*). Next to

14 The familiar "three hands" – good crops, good hunting, and many children – usually prayed for (Chilver 1991: 17) has now seemingly undergone a change. Since there is no game left to be hunted in the Kilum Mountain forest "development" is substituted for "good hunting."

15 A reference to the recent conflict between Oku and Mbese (Mesenaku) and Oku and Nso', two neighbouring chiefdoms.

16 Kwifon is the regulatory society, the most important secret society in Oku.

17 The construction of the rest house started in 1978 but was never completed and is now disintegrating.

the tree lay a flat stone. On this stone the Fon was going to sit when he arrived. The morning air was quite chilly, so a fire was lit in the centre of the enclosure. It took some time and a lot of blowing before the damp, wet branches started to catch.

About a quarter of an hour before the Fon arrived, Ngwang, the *nchiy ndaa* who had taken the ram to Lumeto the day before, came with the animal leading it behind him on a rope. He tied it near the place where the Fon was going to sit. According to what Kaberry had been told by Fon Sintieh I, the ram should have been entirely black – “it has always been so” (Kaberry 1960: 26). This detail had been ignored this time. This ram had white markings.

The arrival of the Fon was announced by the *mbæese* group of *nchiyse ntok* (palace guard) playing their instruments – a wooden tube or trumpet called *kembaa*, a double bell (*ɲgem*), and two curved wooden trumpets,¹⁸ decorated with cowries and liberally rubbed with cam-wood. These instruments were played at intervals indicating the progress of the Fon’s journey. The instrument players, stripped to the waist, walked in a single line, led by the man blowing the *kembaa*. The last man carried a raffia bag (*ketuu kebam*) over his shoulder. The *mbæese* group should have been followed by Shufaay Nsaanen (first assistant of the Fon), Shufaay Ibal (second assistant), Ba Ntok Ngum (Fon’s titular father), and Faay Chung of Keyon (Bah 2004: 54). But as it happened all these palace notables were missing from the line. Shufaay Nsaanen and Shufaay Ibal were already at the “ceremonial grounds,” having arrived by different transport, and the chair of Faay Chung was vacant (d. 14 January 2008). Several people told me about the “correct” order of the royal procession, but as it often happens it was not followed.

Behind the *mbæese* group came some elderly and experienced *nchiyse ntok*, carrying raffia bags which, among other things, contained the ceremonial dress and the white feather headdress the Fon was going to wear when circling the lake. Immediately after the Fon walked a long line of Kwifon members, mainly those who had been newly recruited in September 2007. They were followed by a number of the Fon’s wives (*əbkiy ntok*) and Queen mothers (*ɛnoo ntok*). The first (the Fon’s married wife before he became Fon) was carrying the Fon’s *aga* bag hanging from a bamboo pole over her shoulder. A small-sheathed cutlass was attached to the bag. Others carried a long necked calabash



Fig. 2: Fon of Oku resting after arriving at the ceremonial ground near the lake.



Fig. 3: Fon of Oku making ritual invocation while scraping the prayer woods.

(*fetem əmduk*) with palm wine topped by a raffia leaf in a back basket, a large clay wine pot (*ɛykeɲ*) also in a back basket, a wooden bowl covered with a large leaf, etc.

When the Fon arrived he rested for a few minutes on the stone near the tree (Fig. 2) which had been covered with *ɲkeɲ* leaves before going down into a small valley out of sight of the people to change into his royal regalia – a voluminous red and black striped loincloth, necklaces, bangles, cross-garlands, cowry-studded cap, etc. Shufaay Nsaanen and Shufaay Ibal, too, changed into their traditional attire. Back at the ceremonial grounds the Fon made a long ritual invocation while scraping the “prayer woods” (Fig. 3):

The fathers of this place and all the gods of Oku, we would like, first of all, to ask for forgiveness because there are certain things concerning this journey (*ɛyjel*) that never had been before – you people should forgive us, before anything else.¹⁹

¹⁹ The Fon asked for pardon because he and his “entourage” came to the lake by car, an innovation which never happened before.

¹⁸ Many people mistakenly think that these trumpets are elephant tusks.

Begging the gods here and the fathers of Oku that we are here on this day *əbkuotuwi* as the country (*ketum*) has taken me to come and hand (me) to the Lake (*vii se jio keghoo*), meanwhile we already offered (*tine*) to the gods back home and are equally coming to tell the Lake that the gods at home were already visited.²⁰ Let those gods take my arm and hand (me) to the Lake and the Lake will show how I will go home and gather the people of Oku. Give them blessings since at this time crops have already been planted. Let those crops grow. Let fertility come to the soil so that our maize plants will produce two, three, four, and five cobs of corn at a time. They will go to bed and bear a boy child, bear twins, triplets, four, and five children each. Let development come into Oku, direct pen (i.e., encourage education), direct speech. Let everything that Oku people present in the market for sale be scrambled for, asking if that Oku seller was already there. If they buy, let us bring home the money and not take it out (i.e., not waste it), but bring the money home and build the country (*ketum*) and people will wonder (saying) they thought Oku was created and (then) thrown (away) and they are like this? Then it is a good thing.

Begging that the gods of Oku, the fathers of Oku and this Lake which we have come to circle round should give strength, give wisdom, health to the leaders of this country so that the country will grow and prosper. Begging that the gods of Oku and the fathers of this place should pass through the Lake and bring schools to Oku, and hospitals and all that the government uses to develop a country, so that the people of Oku can equally benefit from those things.

Begging that all those neighbouring tribes whose intentions are to destroy us,²¹ that they should arrange (i.e., should be accommodating), change their hearts so that together (hand in hand) we can go ahead with the world. Begging that whatever person who left the Kom area and was coming as if they had come up and are preparing (mockingly, *taɲtaye*) to go round the lake, and that whoever he/she will meet there will suffer, will find him/herself surprisingly at Tadu with people already speaking the language of Nso' people. Begging that those from that direction (the people of Mbese), planning to destroy the Tolon bridge so that there will be no way home because we are joking, he/she will surprisingly find him/herself wondering: I thought I was going to Oku, then to the lake, and somebody is speaking Kom?

Begging the gods of Oku to give strength so that this journey round the lake can proceed and while going back home (we) will see the signs (effects) even today. Begging that you will strengthen our legs, direct peo-

ple's voices, direct people's knowledge so that they will walk gently (*nyome-nyome*) round the lake; (they) will disperse and go home and arrange themselves and build this country. Begging that they (*é*) should give knowledge (wisdom – *eytof*) so that people can walk back home as they walked here. Protect (them from) any thorn that could pierce one's foot, hold back the hand that would want to hit the jaw of another – prevent all that is bad today. Begging the gods of Oku to turn away that (kind of) person who is masked (in order) to hide himself and is hurrying here asking if they are doing this so as to arrange this country to stand? Such a person will suddenly find the cloth hiding his person removed so that people know (will identify) such a person. Turn away the spy (*wel nchia yiole*) and turn away our enemy (*wel kenghek* [hatred]). Begging that when one makes an error by way of speaking, his voice should be directed, he should not be insulted like a foolish man and (wonder) where he comes (from) that he was standing here to speak. Wisdom and advice are begged from others. Begging the gods of this land, fathers of this land and this Lake that even in 100 years we will not (finish to) beg (ask) for all we need, begging that they (*é*) should straighten (strengthen) the voice, arms, and legs so that they can go round because since they started begging you people (*ghen*) already know all. Begging that since the journey is long and because of other things they (we) will end here because you (pl) know all we are begging; (let us) leave and start the journey round the lake because that is what we have come for today. Thanks to the gods here, the fathers here and the Lake we have come to go round.

It is interesting that the Fon, when making his invocation, never mentioned Mawɛs by name. He only used the word *jio* (water) or *jio eyghaken* (big water or lake). In the following we will see that during the circumambulation of the lake offerings are made to the five “gods of the lake.” These five gods have their individual names and are associated with the different clans of Oku – Yonge Titi (Nkem clan), Nene (Mbele or royal clan), Shantu (Eydiom clan), Fənfəh (Əbjəŋ clan), and Sombang (Mbulum clan). Two of the smaller clans, Nkem and Idiom, have been fully incorporated into the Mbele clan and are now for all intents and purposes considered Mbele. This means that the three big clans of Oku have their respective “god of the lake,” Mbele having three. But Faay Manko of Ngashie was adamant that these five gods of the lake are actually only one single deity. The three big clans of Oku offer sacrifices to one and the same god of the lake but under different names and in different numinous locations. This would explain why the Fon only used the word *jio* and the general term “gods of the lake.”

After the Fon's ritual invocation he knocked off the dust from the “prayer wood” into the pot which

20 At the beginning of the rainy season, usually in March, sacrifices (*eychiyse əmyin*) are made to the “gods of Oku.” There are 23 gods to whom annual sacrifices are offered in different locations around Oku including the five “gods of the lake” (Koloss 2000: 384f.). The five gods of the Shingaa area, which Koloss mentions, are no longer visited. The practice stopped with the death of Fon Ngum II (d. 1956).

21 The Fon refers to the boundary conflicts between Oku and Mbese (Mbeseaku) at Ichim/Balichim and Oku and Nso' at Tangkiy.



Fig. 4: Fon of Oku pouring palm wine into a sacrificial calabash.

had been filled to the brim with palm wine. Then he threw the two pieces on the ground for an omen. The second throw showed a positive result. Now the offerings for the five “gods of the lake” were made ready: palm wine from the big pot was poured into small calabashes (*əbsek*) with a peace plant used for a stopper (Fig. 4); *njemte* (ground *egussi* mixed with palm oil and salt) was divided into five very small calabash bowls, and five lumps of pounded cocoyam were placed on a raffia bag. The Fon put one of each of these items into small raffia bags (*əbtuu əbuam*, sg. *ketuu kebam*). These bags were then given to the people who were to make the offerings.

Shufaay Nsaanen then shared the remaining *njemte* among the people who happened to stand near giving each a tiny morsel. The Fon poured palm wine from the dividing calabash into the cupped hands of Faayse, Kwifon members and other bystanders, also some women. He was soon relieved by Shufaay Ibal who continued to share the wine till the pot was empty. In the meantime Shufaay Nsaanen mixed cam-wood and palm wine in his left hand which he then liberally rubbed on the foreheads of all those who were to join the royal procession around the lake – except the women.

The Circumambulation of the Lake

Then the procession went under way. It was led by the *nchiy ndaa* leading the ram on a rope. He was followed by the five people carrying the sacrificial offerings. The *mbεεse* group came next, followed by the Fon, Shufaay Nsaanen, and Shufaay Ibal, the Fon’s attendants (*nchiyse ntok*), a long line of newly recruited Kwifon members, and finally the Fon’s wives and queen mothers (*εnoo ntok*). They

first went down to the shore of the lake and then turned left into the forest. The procession around the lake was made in a clockwise direction. A path was roughly cleared of grass, branches, hanging lianas, and fallen debris by men from Kesotin. They have their beehives in this forest around the lake and so know the area well. While the royal procession followed the cleared path hundreds of people pushed through the thick undergrowth of the forest on the upper side to the left. Nobody was allowed to walk between the procession and the lake.

Many people stayed behind and took the opportunity to collect seaweeds from the lake, which are believed to be medicinal. But not everybody was allowed to enter the lake to harvest plants growing there on this day of the royal ritual. The people walking with the Fon and medicine people with “bags,” i.e., those who possess medicine bags, were prohibited to enter. But they could ask somebody to give them some of the leaves he had moved from the lake, and many did so. Other people filled bottles, calabashes, or plastic containers with water, which is also valued for its healing effects. The water is used to wash and to drink. I saw many people take a dip in the cold water shivering violently when coming out. Actually, no person should have entered the water prior to the “sacrifice” of the ram. Only after the Fon had thrown the ram into the lake were people allowed to enter the lake. But as it happened, many people had walked into the shallow water of the lake even before the Fon arrived. Most of the people were ignorant of this prohibition and it would have been hard to control.

Soon we came to the first numinous place where the Fon was going to throw the living ram into the lake, the highlight of the ritual. From the footpath down to the water there was an almost vertical drop of about 10 m. It was here that the Fon had a bad fall. For anyone attempting to go down the place was difficult to negotiate. What happened was that the Fon broke with one foot through the soft ground behind a tree root which crossed the place. He lost his balance and fell headlong forward, his foot tied behind the root prevented him from falling further. A few Kwifon members (*nchiyse ntok*) who were near him could not prevent the fall, but they came quickly to his help and got him on his feet again. I was standing just a few meters above the place where it happened. When I saw the Fon falling I already feared the worst but luckily he was not hurt except for some minor bruises.

Next followed the sacrifice of the ram. The Fon, having moved his shoes, and two Kwifon members, Nforme Ndula and Mangek, entered about five metres into the shallow waters of the lake dragging the



Fig. 5: Fon of Oku about to sacrifice the ram by throwing it into the lake.



Fig. 6: The ram swimming in the lake.

ram behind them. Then they lifted up the animal, one by its hind legs and one by its front legs, with the rope still tied around its neck. After the Fon had touched the animal with his hands they threw it high into the water (Fig. 5). The ram swam quite some distance into the lake (Fig. 6), bleating continuously, but then turned round and came back to the shore. The animal was caught and thrown back into the water a second time. This time it did not go far. As soon as it reached deeper water – for about 10 to 15 metres around the edge the lake is quite shallow – it walked back to everybody's disappointment. At the third attempt the ram only went a few metres and came back. The ram was then tethered at the edge of the lake. I was told that with Fon Ngum III it happened the same, but with Fon Sintieh I it swam out into the lake and was never seen again.²²

Then the Fon and some of his attendants (*nchi-yse ntok*) went behind a steep cliff to the left, out of sight of everybody, where he put on his beautiful ceremonial white feather cap called *fenən ə mboj* (Fig. 7), which he wore at his presentation to the people (15 November 2006). These are the only two occasions when the Fon wears this cap. This is believed to be the very cap which Ma, the god of the lake, gave to Mkong Mote after defeating the Fon



Fig. 7: Fon of Oku wearing the headdress *fenən ə mboj* about to make a ritual invocation.

of Kijem who challenged him for the possession of the lake.

After the Fon had clambered up the steep, almost vertical cliff, Faay Kayan of Manchok, representing late Mbungwa of Lui of the Nkem clan, hung the bag with the offerings on the branch of a stick and called on Yonge Titi, the first of the “gods of the lake.” Faay Kayan facing the lake clapped his hands five times. Then he called out, “Ooooooh Yonge Titi!” He did this three times. After alerting the god he told him that they have come with a gift of food and palm wine. He informed the god that Fon Ngum III is no more and that his place had been taken by one of his children who has come here today. Then the Fon took up the lead and made the following ritual invocation:

We started with a plea for forgiveness ... begging that you should pour out your blessings which will make our crops to grow fast and bear three, four, five cobs each. Begging for people – begging for a boy and for a girl so that when they climb the bed looking for a child, they will bear four-four children, five-five children. Begging that the government (*mekale*) should come into

²² This was denied by Faay Manko of Ngashie who walked around the lake with Fon Sintieh I and personally witnessed the return of the animal to the shore. He said that as far as he knew all the rams thrown into the lake came back. In former times, people were not allowed to come near to the place where the ram was thrown into the lake. People were made to believe that the animal swam towards the middle of the lake and drowned, which was a clear sign that it had been accepted by the god of the lake. The fact that the place where the ram was “sacrificed” was hidden from view by trees whose branches extended into the lake further contributed to the general belief that the ram disappeared in the lake. It would be only natural for an animal that knows how to swim to follow its instinct of survival and return to the shore.



Fig. 8: Fon of Oku walking around the lake accompanied by his dignitaries.

Oku via schools, hospitals, and in anyway that can bring development. Begging and reiterating that they already asked for forgiveness because modernity (*mekale*) has come; saying that as they (*é*) came here today in a vehicle (*kevəə makale*) it was because people are not in good health these days and there are other things that will have to be done on return. For this reason, something which could cause the anger of the gods, I want to ask for forgiveness. Begging that you will accept this *njemte*, (that) your brothers (*ghon no vie*) will accept and you will all eat and drink that water that accompanies the food, and your hearts will cool (*zəəle* – to be fresh; to rest) and you will hold me (and) when we will go back home, we will see the signs (*əbchəyten*) even today. Saying that they will not keep on singing (i.e., begging), because there is a lot to beg but you gods all know. You (pl.) will straighten the voice, spirit (*keyioy*), straighten the pleas they are pleading and plead for what we have not mentioned and add to those we have mentioned. Giving thanks that you will turn away those who hate Oku a lot, turn away those who think that they will bring ants (*əmbuaa*) to come and destroy our crops, turn them away, and we beg for forgiveness through the God of heaven and through the Lake. Thanks.

At the end of the “prayer” Shufaay Nsaanen called out: “*əbkuo lək*” (Oku people rejoice)! There followed a huge shout and cheers from thousands of people who had gathered in the forest above us. This was the reenactment of the welcome Mkong Mote got by the Oku people when he victoriously emerged from the lake.

Then the procession moved on (Fig. 8). After about 200 metres we came to the second place of

a “god of the lake,” the place of the god Nene. Faay Kofon (Mbele), alias Faay Tutesəy, was the person to make the offering. He left the footpath which at that point headed straight up a steep ascent and went about 10 metres off the cleared path to the side. It should be mentioned, that these numinous places, the places of the gods, are in no way different from the surrounding areas. They are not marked by huge trees, stones, or caves. Only the people concerned know where these places of the gods are. Facing the lake Faay Kofon clapped his hands, as mentioned above, and called on the god Nene. The Fon again responded by making an invocation.

After walking on for some distance, we came to the place where another god of the lake, Shantu, was called upon. This numinous place was under the control of Faay Əydiom of Lui. Since Faay Əydiom is old and can no longer trek long distances, he was represented by a *nchiy ndaa* of that compound. The *nchiy ndaa* went down from the path about ten yards. He hung the bag with the sacrificial offerings on the branch of a tree. He stepped back and facing the lake he clapped his hands five times before calling in a loud voice: “Oooooh Shantu!” He did this three times. Then he continued:

We are in this forest today with a new child whom we have come to present to you, that you should invite all the lake gods, invite those of the forest,²³ that you should

23 The “gods of Oku” fall into two categories, viz. the “gods of the lake” and the “gods of the forest.”

gather around this *njemte* and eat with one mouth and one breath (spirit) and give him saliva (*eylie eytaŋene*), give him a fresh hand (i.e., riches), strengthen him with bones of a leopard so that he can lead Oku. Meanwhile (as I am) speaking like that at the entrance of the god place they are there and he will speak with his own mouth.

When he had finished the Fon continued:

Begging Shantu as we already went round and offered to the gods at home and have come to the forest today to give the Fon's hand into the lake god's hand. Saying and begging that what an Oku man can be requesting is only good development. Put an end to the troubles given us by our neighbours. Shantu, that you should meet your brothers, gods of the forest so that they can correct us so that when one wants to speak, he should speak with a good voice. Even when one errs and is to be corrected, he should not be insulted and ask[ed] why he was there. Begging that a good pen be given Oku, bring schools, bring hospitals, and bring whatever thing that a country depends on to develop. Begging that – when we started we asked for forgiveness – because there are lots of errors made already, but man erred first before the son of god. They should forgive us. Begging that since today has been set aside for this very difficult job, you should direct people's feet so that they can go round the lake gently and take their blessing and when back home will develop the country. You gods should come and look at the landslides and if the slides are in whatever way, people can gently pass there and when they will be going home, you will arrange the area for a good walk next time. Begging that they should give food since maize has been planted and is growing, let all maize as well as other crops bear three-three, four-four, five-five fruits. You will give a male child, a female child, they will bear three-three, four-four, five-five children. Begging that – from the look of the lake it is showing good luck – when we will go back home from where we left we will see the signs (of good fortune). I see that if they continue enumerating, it will be like disturbing you the gods as you know all and if one takes a hundred years, he will never exhaust his list of needs. Begging that you should give strength, so that the journey can continue and call other gods and go home to see how you have received the country and how it has grown, that you . . .

Begging that hospitals should come into Oku for good health, because without good health one will do nothing. Begging that these gods should give power, so that they can go round the lake without a problem and go home and people will praise that the gods of Oku are good. Begging that as the first speaker said that those with whom Oku has a boundary that they should have sympathy for Oku and allow Oku (to live) in peace so that Oku can be trying, because it is like a country that was made and thrown (away). When one is allowed thus to suffer like a child without parents, it is God who is looking after you, so we are happy that we have gods that are caring for us. Giving thanks, we will not continue singing (i.e., begging) because if we continue, we should be here at the lake for a hundred years . . .

The terrain got more and more difficult. We needed all our efforts and attention to negotiate the difficult path. It never went straight ahead. It was always either clambering up punishing cliffs, or sliding down equally steep slopes. There were many fallen trees and tree roots and other obstacles crossing the path. Scaling up the almost vertical cliffs one had to use hands and feet, hoping that the branch or sapling one had grasped would not break. It was quite an ordeal. I was sorry for the Fon and other dignitaries who were walking in their bulging loincloths, which often got caught on branches and sticks. Before we reached the outlet of the lake called “tale of Mawes” (*əbkun Mawes*) we came to the place of the god Fənfəh. This numinous place is under the care of Faay Nkaa of Bow (*əbjəŋ* clan) who was represented by Pa Langtum of Feking. Pa Langtum hung the bag with the offering on the branch of a tree and facing the lake called on the god in the aforementioned way and made a ritual invocation. Again the Fon took up the lead and added his own “prayer.”

Before crossing the “tale of Mawes,” the single outlet of the lake towards Kom, the Fon made a “negative offering,” i.e., he threw *njemte* over his shoulder to the “bad god” that was believed to stay



Fig. 9: Fon of Oku negotiating a steep decline.

on the other side of the “tale of Mawes,” i.e., the side of Kom. After crossing the outlet, a stretch of black mud, we came to the most difficult part: a long, punishing and very steep climb followed by a similar difficult descent (Fig. 9). The rest of the journey was not so difficult. But there was another problem. It started to rain.

The fifth and last place where an offering to a god of the lake was made was at the end of the circumambulation, just before we closed the circle. This was the place of the god Sombang of the Mbulum clan. Faay Kayan of Manchok made the offering and called on the god and the Fon made the final invocation. When we arrived back at the “ceremonial grounds” from where we started off, there were cheers and shouts from the many people who did not go round the lake but had stayed behind. Normally it takes one about two hours and a half to three hours to circle the lake. It had taken us more than six hours!

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