

Amina Djouldé Christelle

**German Colonial Memory in the Gbaya Oral Tradition**

(Bertoua, East Region, Cameroon)

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# German Colonial Memory in the Gbaya Oral Tradition

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Amina Djouldé Christelle

## Introduction

This paper analyzes the corpus of the oral tradition of the Gbaya<sup>1</sup> of Bertoua<sup>2</sup> as an entry point to grasp the local dynamics of German colonial domination. From the perspective of Cultural Studies, the aim is to demonstrate how, among the Gbaya, oral tradition constitutes both a documentary source and form of mnemonic support regarding German colonization in Cameroon. These people, relying on oral literature, have produced an endogenous version of memorization of their colonial encounter with Germany that is transmitted orally from generation to generation. Specifically, songs and epic tales of an oral nature are valorized as evidence of the Gbaya version of the German colonial experience.

Indeed, as a fact of civilization, the Gbaya oral tradition – like that of many peoples in Africa – appears to be the foundation of historical consciousness.<sup>3</sup> Via songs, epic oral narratives, tales, myths, and proverbs, the Gbaya manage to record their historical dynamics and transmit them through the ages.<sup>4</sup> Thus, when the encounter with the German colonizers occurred, it was through an oral corpus that these people chose to record this page of their history.<sup>5</sup> Like with archival, archaeological, and iconographic materials, the

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1 Gbàyà in the Gbaya writing system.

2 Bertoua is the capital city of East Region, Cameroon, being situated in the Division of Lom-et-Djérem. Years ago, this town was a group of small villages and hamlets under the main town. To learn more about the history of this town, see: Dieudonné Ndanga Ngnantare, *La chefferie de Bertoua, Ca 1840–1947, Memoire de Maîtrise en Histoire* (Université de Ngaoundéré, 2003).

3 Philip A. Noss, 'Héros et l'héroïsme dans la tradition et la vie Gbaya', in Jean Boutrais and Adala Hermenegildo (eds), *Peuple et culture de l'Adamamoua* (Paris: Ostorn, 1993), 203–217, here p. 203; Philip C. Burnham, *The Politics of Cultural Difference in Northern Cameroon* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press International African library, 1996), p. 17; Philip C. Burnham, *Gbaya. The Heritage* (The Heritage Library of African Peoples, New York: Rosen Pub. Group, 1997), p. 6.

4 Dieudonné Ndanga Ngnantare, *Returning to the Past*. Film presented for a Degree of Master of Philosophy in Visual Culture Studies. Dieudonné Ndanga Ngnantare (Regie), (Tromsø: University of Tromsø, 2007), p.10.

5 Dieudonné Ndanga Ngnantare and Henri Alexis Ndanga, *L'identité Gbaya. Essai de reconstitution de l'Histoire et des Coutumes des Gbaya de l'Est du Cameroun* (Saarbrücken: Éditions universitaires européennes, 2014), p. 95; D.-B. Beloko, *L'homme Gbaya, son histoire, sa culture* (Ngaoundéré: EELC, 2002), p. 22; Philip

Gbaya's oral literature is an epistemological and heuristic entry to understand the trajectory of German colonial domination from a local perspective. Hence the need to make this cultural fact intelligible as a memorial paradigm that serves to remember the German colonial past from the perspective of the dominated. Following this logic, this study is a contribution on colonial memory in Cameroon.

In general, the literature hereon mostly presents the German colonial domination on the territory and the transformations undergone as a result. From then on, to describe the territorial formation of Kamerun, the peaceful and military mechanisms of German occupation are highlighted.<sup>6</sup> From a postcolonial perspective, the assessment of the relationship between Cameroon and Germany scrutinizes the politics of colonial memory that continue to shape diplomatic ties between the two countries.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the historiography of German colonization highlights inclusive and complex dynamics. The reflections decipher the dichotomy between endogenous actors during the process of colonial expansion. Local chiefs<sup>8</sup> as well as the general population<sup>9</sup> have been identified as being German accomplices. Alongside the collaborative approach, biographical

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A. Noss, *Gbaya, phonologie et grammaire: dialecte yaayuwee* (Meiganga: Eglise évangélique luthérienne du Cameroun, Centre de traduction gbaya, 1981), p. 1.

- 6 Siegfried Passarge, *Adamawa. Rapport de l'expédition du comité allemand pour le Cameroun au cours des années 1893-1894* (Paris: Karthala Relire, 2010); Florian Hoffmann, *Okkupation und Militärverwaltung in Kamerun. Etablierung und Institutionalisierung des kolonialen Gewaltmonopols 1891-1914* (Göttingen: Cuvillier, 2007); Curt von Morgen and Philippe Laburthe-Tolra, *À travers le Cameroun du sud au nord. Voyages et explorations dans l'arrière-pays de 1889 à 1891. With the collaboration of Rudolf Hellgrewe* (Paris: L'Harmattan; Racines du présent, 2009); Adalbert Owona, *La naissance du Cameroun. 1884-1914* (Paris: L'Harmattan; Collection Racines du présent, 1996); Albert Pascal Temgoua, 'La conquête militaire allemande et son impact sur l'économie de l'Adamaoua 1899-1906', *Paideuma*, 40 (1994), pp. 67-79.
- 7 Stefanie Michels and Albert-Pascal Temgoua (eds), *La politique de la mémoire coloniale en Allemagne et au Cameroun. Actes du colloque à Yaoundé, octobre 2003, organisé par Goethe-Institut (Encounters/Begegnungen*, 5, Münster: Lit, 2005); Samuel Nleme Afan and Sil Grâce Mabouang, *La diplomatie et la communicabilité des archives de la période coloniale allemande (1884-1916): cas des archives relatives aux africains ayant servi sous l'égide de l'administration coloniale allemande* (2018) [https://www.goethe.de/resources/files/pdf171/nlemesil\\_article\\_master-class\\_fr.pdf](https://www.goethe.de/resources/files/pdf171/nlemesil_article_master-class_fr.pdf) (last accessed 27.7.2024); Alexandre Kum'a Nduembe III, *L'Afrique et l'Allemagne de la colonisation à la coopération. 1884-1896; le cas du Cameroun* (Yaoundé: Éd. Africavenir, 1986).
- 8 Christian Bommaris, *Der gute Deutsche: Die Ermordung Manga Bells in Kamerun 1914* (Berlin: Berenberg, 2016); Alexandra Loumpet-Galitzine, *Njoya et le royaume bamoun: Les archives de la Société des missions évangéliques de Paris, 1917-1937* (Hommes et sociétés, Paris: Karthala, 2006); Eric Young, 'Samba, Martin-Paul. 1853-1914 German Military Officer and Nationalist Leader in Cameroon', in Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Kwame Anthony Appiah (eds), *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 669; Joseph Gomsu, *Colonisation et organisation sociale. Les chefs traditionnels du Sud-Cameroun pendant la période coloniale allemande (1884-1914)* (Thèse de doctorat de 3e cycle, Saarbrücken, Universität des Saarlandes, 1982).
- 9 Eugène Désiré Eloundou, *Le Sud-Kamerun face à l'hégémonie allemande: 1884-1916* (Émergences africaines, Paris: L'Harmattan, 2016).

studies on some local chiefs have demonstrated that there was also resilience to colonial conquest.<sup>10</sup>

In the same vein, historians have increasingly examined various objects and themes to reconstruct the trajectory of the geostrategic issues that shaped German colonization in an urban and cultural sense. As a result, German colonization in Cameroon has become the subject of historical studies taking a multidisciplinary approach to the logic of memorization. Despite their relevance and the quality of their methodology, the historical literature on German colonization in Cameroon has, however, marginalized oral tradition. Historiography has long privileged the use of written, material, and iconographic sources.<sup>11</sup> When called on, oral sources have relied primarily on the testimonies of direct/indirect actors or specialists of colonization; very often, though, oral tradition is marginalized. Because of this fragmented nature to historical research, this analysis is innovative in the sense that it proceeds to a re-reading of German colonization in a part of east Cameroon from a local perspective that privileges the use of oral tradition. In this way, the colonial episode is not only reconstructed according to the version of the colonized but also from their inventiveness in producing knowledge based on orality.

The mechanisms of reconstruction of a historical order from the Gbaya oral literature require that the invention of tradition is convened as a theoretical framework. Speaking of the relationship between colonization and the invention of tradition in African cultures, Ranger argues that the quest for recognition among colonized peoples has led them to proceed to such invention.<sup>12</sup> Thus, elements of culture are reshaped through further additions to create traditions that are adapted to local forms of historical memory. In this perspective, the Gbakisi (a group of Gbaya people native from Bertoua) with their ability to tell their version of the history of the colonial encounter with Germany through songs and epic tales manage to revise and invent a tradition. For the Gbaya,

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10 Bommaris, *Der gute Deutsche* (above, n. 8); Young, 'Samba, Martin-Paul. 1853–1914 German Military Officer and Nationalist Leader in Cameroon.' (above, n. 8); Hanse Gilbert Mbeng Dang, *Le prince Nkal Mentsouga et la colonisation allemande 1850–1916* (Université de Yaoundé I: Maitrise en Histoire, 2005); Ndanga Ngnantare, *La chefferie de Bertoua* (above, n. 3); Madeleine Mbono Samba Azan and Bernard Rouzet, *Martin Samba: Face à la pénétration allemande au Cameroun* (Grandes figures africaines, Paris: A.B.C. [Afrique biblio club], 1976).

11 Thierno Moctar Bah, *Historiographie africaine: Afrique de l'Ouest, Afrique Centrale* (Série de livres du Codesria, Dakar: Codesria, Conseil pour le développement de la recherche en sciences sociales en Afrique, 2015); Paul Thompson and Joanna Bornat, *The Voice of the Past: Oral history* (Oxford oral history series; 4th edn., New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017); Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology* (New Brunswick, London: Aldine Publishing Company, 2009).

12 Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence O. Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition* (Canto classics, Cambridge [Cambridgeshire]: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

it is a question of valorizing their potential as warriors and symbolically safeguarding their dignity. However, as part of a postcolonial approach, the analysis of the oral corpus shows that this invented tradition ultimately serves the colonial reasoning. In this respect, the reflections of Kavwahirehi are relevant to understanding the postcolonial dimension of invented traditions. The author argues that oral literature is a mode of colonial production that serves to sustain colonial reasoning.<sup>13</sup> In other words, the oral corpus produced in Africa on colonization, when exploited by the West, has a colonial purpose. In contrast to Kavwahirehi's approach, which considers the colonial order to be at the heart of the manipulation of oral discourse, this study highlights the dichotomous dimensions to the invention of tradition among the Gbaya. More explicitly, by inventing their version of colonization, the Gbaya construct their own mnemonic mechanism that is both supportive of the imperialist image of German colonization and also of the Gbaya's glorious warrior past.

This work on Gbaya local German colonial memory through oral literature is the result of three months of fieldwork in Bertoua.<sup>14</sup> This town was chosen because of its extensive colonial history. The materials used are written, oral, and iconographic. The written data made it possible to situate the historical contexts that determine the emergence of traces of German colonial actions in stories and songs. The oral sources – essentially qualitative, and collected via semi-structured interviews conducted exclusively with the Gbaya – provide information on the different versions and meanings of the songs and stories collected. The sampling of oral literature was based on songs and stories that are popular within the Gbaya community. Transcriptions of this oral literature were made by Gbaya language specialists and a research assistant specializing in the history of Bertoua to ensure that the data contained the signs necessary for understanding the texts. Note-taking and audio recordings were my primary data-collection tools. The analysis of the data was done by comparing the primary and secondary sources, which made it possible to detect truth and invention in the telling of the story of German colonization. It combined transdisciplinary and multimethod approaches. The historical approach was combined with the analysis of literary texts. The collected oral information was subjected to literary, historical, and sociological criticism. On the whole, the data

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13 Kasereka Kavwahirehi, 'La littérature orale comme production coloniale', *Etudes Africaines*, 44/176 (2004), pp. 793–813.

14 I am indebted to my research assistant Belya Zeck Chrystelle, who enabled me to listen all 30 versions of the songs and epics tales she recorded. Her knowledge on Gbaya culture helped me to understand certain symbols and to situate their use.



collected made it possible to build the work around two major articulations. First, it is a question of making a brief history of the colonial encounter between the Gbaya and the German colonizers. Second, it is also a question of restoring the analysis of songs and epic biographical narratives as mechanisms of colonial memorial construction in the invention of oral tradition.

### The Gbaya and the German colonial encounter

Several authors maintain that the area that makes up present-day central Sudan is the point of origin of Gbaya migration.<sup>15</sup> This version is anchored in the collective memory of the Gbaya, as numerous oral testimonies situate Sudan as where these people hail from originally. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the pressures of slave raids and drought would have amplified this migration. This justified their presence in the area that would later become Cameroon after a stay in the Central African Republic. The settlement of the Gbaya in the territory that would become Bertoua dates back to the eighteenth century.<sup>16</sup> Initially, they were hamlets made up of huts called Gaïmona. The area was ruled by King Mbartaoua.<sup>17</sup> The latter reigned from 1884 to 1903 (hence the origin of the city's French name, Bertoua) and organized the structure of the village like a hierarchical chieftaincy.<sup>18</sup> Thus, in the image of centralized power, the Gbaya from Gaïmona together formed an independent territory, one governed by law and managed by a chief who had a palace, an army, and a court. The Germans found, therefore, an organized society.

Contact between the Gbaya and the Germans dates back to the end of the eighteenth century. Following the signing of the German-Douala treaty on 12 July 1884, the Germans began their colonial rule in Kamerun.<sup>19</sup> After the annexation of the territory's littoral regions, the Germans planned to conquer the hinterlands. Hence, they needed to penetrate the territory's eastern part. The Germans began to settle in Doumé, where they established

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15 Burnham, *Gbaya*, p. 10 (above, n. 3); Bah Mouctar Thierno, 'Le facteur Peul et les Relations inter-ethniques dans l'Adamaoua au XIXe siècle', in Jean Boutrais and Adala Hermenegildo (eds), *Peuple et culture de l'Adamaoua* (Paris: Ostrom, 1993), p. 67.

16 Ndanga Ngnantare and Ndanga, *L'identité Gbaya* (above, n.5), p. 75.

17 Mbärtouà in the Gbaya language.

18 Léonidas Bateranzigo, *Les Gbaya et les Kaka de l'Est-Cameroun. Des origines à 1960: Approche historique* (Thèse Soutenue en vue de l'obtention d'un Doctorat de 3e cycle en Histoire à l'Université de Yaoundé, 1995), p. 123.

19 Adelbert Owona, *La naissance du Cameroun (1884-1914)* (Paris, L'Harmattan, 1996), p. 9.

a military base. With the ambition to link Doumé to Ngaoundéré in Adamawa Region, they were forced to follow the Nyong River from the north. This led them to the Gbaya chiefdom of Gaimona,<sup>20</sup> which means, freedom, independence, and absence of aggression.

This version of the German arrival from Doumé is the most common in Gbaya literature and oral testimony. The written sources indicate the opposite. The archives and secondary written sources state that the Germans penetrated Gaimona from Moulondou, which was once part of Sangha-Ngoko district. It was the accounts of Dr. Plehn's scientific explorations that allowed the Germans to master the territory of the Gbaya. Also, current oral sources indicate that Plehn was the first German to penetrate the Gaimona chiefdom. In 1895, coming from Ngaoundéré via Kundé, Hans Dominik was the first German to stay in this chiefdom. Two years later, Officer Stand stayed there.<sup>21</sup> The Gbaya in their historical tradition considers Plehn as the pioneer of the German presence on their territory.

From first contact, the Gbaya were curious and amazed to see a being with white skin that they initially equated with the *koy*.<sup>22</sup> After, the Gbaya quickly realized that the 'white-skinned beings'<sup>23</sup> they had just met were not fish but rather human and similar. From then on, based on their phenotype, the Gbaya referred to the Germans as *gbouï* ('white men'). The evolution of relations with the newcomers allowed the Gbaya to later understand that the *gbouï* were called 'Germans'. Unable to articulate the name 'German' any better, the Gbaya reappropriated the word and designated the new collaborators *zàmàn*. The information collected testifies that the first contacts between the Gbaya and the Germans were peaceful. After being received by Chief Mbartoua, the Germans were installed as his guests in the village. After, they began to express their desire to exploit the territory. To realize this ambition, Plehn as head of the district began introducing forced labor and the payment of taxes. These many waves of abuse pushed Chief Mbartoua to incite his people to revolt, namely to disobey the orders of the German settlers. To demonstrate his authority, Chief Mbartoua murdered Plehn and buried his body in the bush.<sup>24</sup> This act was used by Lieutenant Von Stein as an argument to launch the expedition against the Gbaya from 1901 to 1903. The resistance organized by Chief Mbartoua manifested in the form of armed conflict, which the Gbaya have not failed to evoke in war songs readapted to remembering this colonial period.

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20 In Gbaya writing, *gǎ̀à g d*, *Gaimonà*, or *Grand Campement Gaimonà*.

21 Bateranzigo, *Les Gbaya et les Kaka de l'Est-Cameroun* (above, n.18), p. 123.

22 Fish in the Gbaya language.

23 The Gbaya used to called Germans this.

24 Ndanga Ngnantare and Ndanga, *L'identité Gbaya* (above, n. 5).

## Invented oral tradition and colonial memory in Gbaya folk songs

The Gbaya people by essence are a people of hunters and warriors; as a teenager (around the age of eight), the young boy is gathered to endure the *Làbí* rite of passage. During these initiation rites, he is removed from his family and spends several months in the forest. After, he returns haloed with the socio-spiritual knowledge that allows him to assert himself within his community. He could therefore master the strategies of war. It is in this sense that Yaziki reveals that ‘The young boy during his *làbí* initiation was trained in the practice of war. The latter was therefore ready to defend his community wherever the need arose.’<sup>25</sup>

In reality, the *Làbí* was not just a simple initiation rite but also a school of life that is at the foundation of Gbaya civilization. According to Thierno, the *làbí* is at the heart of cultural mores that allows the development and perpetuation of magico-religious practices, ecological knowledge, and social and political regulatory codes that constitute a coherent system.<sup>26</sup> The *làbí* is also the *Gbàyà* initiatory school during which the art of waging war is inculcated in the youth to perpetuate the grandeur of the Gbaya. Through the words of these authors, one can understand that in Gbaya society *làbí* constitutes the backbone of its civilization. It is the basis for the training and selection of the members of the *sirtà* whose lives are now devoted to collective hunting and the practice of warfare.

Indeed, according to Dieudonné Ndanga, in ancient Gbaya society, the *sirtà* constituted a particular group of men initiated into the *làbí*. They had mastered the handling of weapons intended for hunting as well as for armed confrontations.<sup>27</sup> The *sirtà* fulfilled the supplying of food and security for the community. After initiation, one officially becomes a *sirtà* following a public naming ceremony that takes place very early in the morning during the beginning of the hunting season. This ceremony is presided over by the dean of the *Sirtà* who blesses them by sprinkling *Zòrò* water on the neophytes, urging them to become ‘*Sirtà Lions*’ (i. e. to symbolically be strong). To ensure their identity specificity, the neophytes are scarified and are presented to the rest of the community. In contempo-

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25 Formal interview with Yaziki Simon, Bertoua, 31.8.2021.

26 Ninga Songo, ‘Le ‘Labi’, Rite d’initiation des Gbaya’, in Hermenegildo Adala and Jean Boutrais (eds), *Peuples et cultures de l’Adamaoua, Cameroun. Actes du colloque de Ngaoundéré du 14 au 16 janvier 1992* (Collection colloques et séminaires/Institut Français de Recherche Scientifique pour le Développement en Coopération, Paris: Editions de l’Orstom, 1993), 181–186, here p. 181; Thierno Mouvtar Bah, ‘Le facteur peul et les relations inter-ethniques dans l’adamaoua au XIXe siècle’, in Hermenegildo Adala and Jean Boutrais (eds), *Peuples et cultures de l’Adamaoua, Cameroun. Actes du colloque de Ngaoundéré du 14 au 16 janvier 1992* (Collection colloques et séminaires / Institut Français de Recherche Scientifique pour le Développement en Coopération, Paris: Orstom, 1993), 61–86, here p. 61.

27 Ndanga and Ndanga, *L’identité Gbaya* (above, n. 16), p. 123.



Fig. 1: A young Sirtà wearing war clothes like old Sirtà, Bertoua, September 2018. Photo: Amina Djouldé Christelle.

rary Gbaya oral epic narratives, this grandiloquent perception of the Sirtà persists among the youth as well as adults. Thus, Mboundar states to this effect that ‘The sirtà were such strong and fearless men practicing skillful hunting who could kill or capture any animal no matter how powerful. The sirtà were fearless in war and no people could subdue the Gbaya.’<sup>28</sup>

From Mboundar Constantin’s testimony, a grandiloquent logic emerges that falls under the invention of tradition. For, so far, no military defeat of the sirtà is evoked. There is this desire of the Gbaya to safeguard their representation in the collective memory as powerful warriors and the prospect of perpetuating their legitimacy as brave persons. For by the time that the Germans arrived, the military power, the prestige, and the prowess of the Gbaya and Chief Mbartoua had already been established in the East Region. In addition, the Gbaya believed that their capacity for warfare had mystical origins related to the *lõbí*. Amulets were part of the local war dress. The war uniform is deerskins on the torso and the genitalia cover<sup>29</sup> made of panther skin because wearing it connotes the appropriation of the animal’s hunting skills. On the legs, sported is the *gãm̀bàs* counter shins made of ebam dumbu tree bark – the shield is always based on this tree. The latter is very resistant. Bounda tells to this effect that

28 Formal interview with Gabana Mboundar Constantin, Bertoua, 30.8.2021.

29 Locally called *yùk d*.



Fig. 2: Young Sirtà women wearing war clothes like old Sirtà women with the peace tree in their hands, Bertoua, September 2018. Photo: Amina Djouldé Christelle.

The war uniform consisted of hind animal skins on the torso, and the gambas on the shins. The guru amulet of protection was the most important item that had to be worn because when the gbòyà wore it made them invisible and even invincible.<sup>30</sup>

It is therefore with their military legitimacy and above all their philosophy of peace<sup>31</sup> that the Gbaya, proud of their freedom, have undertaken to resist all forms of oppression. The Gbaya have built a philosophy centered on peaceful cohabitation, conflict resolution, reconciliation, and the fight against oppression, among other things.<sup>32</sup>

Attached to their freedom by refusing all forms of domination and oppression, the Gbaya do not hesitate to declare war on any people whose ambition is to conquer them.

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30 Formal interview with Gabana Mboundar Constantin, Bertoua, 31.8.2019.

31 Peace among the Gbaya is referred to as *nga'a mo*, which can be translated as calmness, gentleness, tranquillity, and the absence of disorder. That is why the Gbaya have considered colonial occupation and domination as a form of violence that destroyed their peace. To overcome it, they did not hesitate fight for their freedom. For more information, see: Amina Djouldé Christelle, 'Gender approach to peacebuilding in Cameroon and Central African Republic. The case study of the Oko'o Nga'a mo (women of peace)', in Thomas Kwasi Tiekou, Amanda Coffie, Mary Boatemaa Setrana et al. (eds), *The Politics of Peacebuilding in Africa* (Routledge Studies on African Politics and International Relations, Abingdon, Oxon, New York, NY: Routledge, 2022), pp. 189–202.

32 Thomas Christensen, *An African Tree of Life* (American Society of Missiology Series, 14, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990), p. 1.



Fig. 3: Gbaya's mystical amulets inspired by past models, Bertoua, September 2018. Photo: Amina Djouldé Christelle.

During German colonization, the Gbaya refused to be submitted to the injunction of Dr. Plehnn and got rid of him to keep their sovereignty. This revolt resulted in several significant deaths on both the German and the Gbaya sides. The Gbaya set up kidnappings as a means of waging war. Therefore, after the Germans were captured, the Gbaya made them consume a poison called *mini* (made from the excrement of the mole). After ingesting it, the captive was dead within seconds. Ngaré's description of this practice can be summed up in these words:

After the capture of a German, the Gbaya made a poison from mole excrement. This poison called *mini* was rubbed on the end of spears during the war or otherwise, this toxic product was made to be ingested by the captive who lost his life after a few seconds. The latter was very quickly butchered before the poison spread to the rest of the body and its flesh was consumed.<sup>33</sup>

It is difficult to verify this practice of anthropophagy among the Gbaya, but this discourse is common in the oral tradition. The practice was a guarantee of domination and subjugation.

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33 Formal interview with Aiba Ngaré, Bertoua, 1.8.2021.

tion of the ‘white man considered invincible’<sup>34</sup>. In addition, in popular imagery, it is told that Chief Mbartoua had Dr. Plehn killed and ate his flesh. This act made him mystically stronger. Also, the consumption of human flesh by the Gbaya of this period was a guarantee of longevity and allowed for invigoration. During the conquest launched by Lieutenant Von Stein, the German superiority in terms of arms forced the Gbaya to adopt asymmetrical means of warfare. Instead of confronting the Germans directly with their spears and arrows, they kidnapped them and murdered them with poison. When one of the settlers was killed, the Gbaya performed the war dance *ɔ̀ gànà mɔ̀* and sang in chorus songs such as *Gàwí* (Wicked man) and *Sàkɔ̀gó* (All people) that Baradoma was kind enough to share with us.

*ngàwí éé x3*

Wicked man (Translation)

*ɔ̀ tè kpà kà dàà ñdàà ngawí x2*

We will find the weakness of the wicked man (Translation)

*ooo ngàwí ééé ngàwí éééé bíró gbè ngàwí x2.*

Oooo wicked man, wicked man, we killed him during the war (Translation)

This first refrain means that no matter how long the escape, the secret of the supposedly stronger person (meaning the German colonizer) was always going to be discovered eventually. We were right about him and killed him. The *ngàwí* refers to the wicked, the one who wants to coerce and subdue the Gbaya through violence. Contextual analysis of this song allows its readaptation to be situated in the period when Plehn was murdered. For the Gbaya, as a sign of celebration of the disappearance of the district chief considered an executioner, they have readapted this hunting song into a war song. It is demonstrated in the second refrain of the song.

*sàkɔ̀gó ééé wànré ééé sakɔ̀gó x2*

All people come quickly (Translation)

*sàkɔ̀gó aaa è ñgàn wànré*

All people come to celebrate (Translation)

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34 Formal interview with Aiba Ngaré, Bertoua, 1.8.2021.

éééé sákogó

All people (Translation)

bíró gbè bé wàn ndé éééé sákogó

Can the king (Gbaya) be killed in the battlefield? (Translation)

This second song means that the war permitted the elimination of the strongest (i. e. the German colonizers). The Gbaya are now mightier than the Germans and they will always crush their enemies. In other words, the Gbaya managed to get the upper hand over the oppressor. Historically, this war song was invented during the period when Plehn was murdered.<sup>35</sup> As a sign of victory following the death of the oppressor, the Gbaya orchestrated this song as a means of confirming their military superiority. The population repeated all these songs in chorus after those considered the strongest had been neutralized. In addition, the Gbaya had rallying songs to refine their possession and domination of their territory. This is the case with this song of welcome to foreigners that was very quickly reinvented or reapplied as a rallying song in conflict situations.

Sayé nè sayé kè yé, eh eh

This village is our own (Translation)

Eh eh sayé nè sayé kè yé

Eh eh eh, This village is our own (Translation)

mo'o sa'a yé

Until tomorrow (Translation)

This song can be interpreted as meaning ‘This village is ours, it is ours forever.’ The song is orchestrated according to two distinct situations. Sometimes, following victory after an attempted invasion, the Gbaya sang this song to mark their autonomy and also to assert their sovereignty. On the occasion of a revolt or rebellion against German colonial oppression, this song was sung to incite resistance. The interpretation made here is that the Gbaya invented a patriotic song now a symbol of resistance to German colonization.

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35 Formal interview with Aiba Ngaré, Bertoua, 1.8.2021.



This page of history remains painful for many Gbaya. The colonial violence used in Bertoua was traumatic, being imprinted on and evolving within the collective memory. For several informants, the memory of the Germans remains bitter in their hearts because the exactions committed against the Gbaya were marked by the seal of violence. The violence of the German war of conquest in Bertoua, coupled with the trauma of forced labor, led the Gbaya to recognize the domination of the colonizer. This domination is recorded in one of the songs that would almost become a Gbaya anthem.

àyà éé ɔ yu nè nàsàrà<sup>36</sup> ééé (x2) aya éé

*Aya eheh* we are afraid of the white man (German) (Translation)

ɔ ndé nàm bônà ndé

They (the Germans) are not from our family or ethnic group (translation)

àyà éé ɔ yu nè ngá wí aya ééé

We are afraid of those who dominated us with guns (translation)

In its essence, this song expresses the painful resentment of the Gbaya after they lost their autonomy and freedom under the Germans. At the same time, this song is considered as a distress signal that denotes their submission to the colonial order. Therefore, the Gbaya recognized that the Germans were stronger than them. Namely, because they managed to wrest their freedom from them and to assassinate their mythical leader. The Gbaya attributed this superiority to the skin color of the Germans and the powerful war logistics deployed against them.

Through this song the figure of the Germans is associated with terror, violence, and especially domination by arms. Like with French colonization (1914–1960), this song was also used to express the military and political domination of the Gbaya community. As French colonizers imposed forced labor and poverty among the local population, the Gbaya considered it as a form of violence.<sup>37</sup> As a result, they rallied behind Karnu in an insurrection.<sup>38</sup> This war (called ‘Kongo Wara’ or ‘Karnu’s insurrection’) against French

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36 Nassara here refers to the Germans. Because of contact with the Fulani, the Gbaya adopted the appellation of Zaman as also Nassara.

37 Christelle, ‘Gender approach to peacebuilding in Cameroon and Central African Republic’ (above, n. 31).

38 A native of the Sangha River Basin (modern-day Central African Republic), Karnu was the figurehead of Gbaya resistance to French colonization. Considered by the Gbaya both a religious leader and traditional



Fig. 4: German colonial building (Home of the current Bertoua 1 Head of Subdivision), Bertoua, August 2021. Photo: Amina Djouldé Christelle.

colonization, which lasted from 1928 to 1930, was based on the quest for freedom and harmony.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, after their defeat at the hands of the French colonizers, the Gbaya used to sing this song as a form of remembrance of this painful period. Indirectly, this song allowed the colonists to establish their notoriety among these people, who were proud of their freedom. Historically, a context analysis of the Gbaya's military defeats during the colonial era has made it possible to situate the origin of this song as around 1903, after the death of Chief Mbartoua and the submission of the Gbaya to the Germans following the expedition of Lieutenant Von Stein.

### **Chief Mbartoua's epic biography and the making of the hero's tradition**

Among the Gbaya, the biography of Chief Mbartoua, the founder of the city of Bertoua, is an established oral tradition. This story is full of grandiloquence that allows Chief

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healer, he remains posthumously a prophet. The French army assassinated him on 11. 12. 1928. For more information, see Martin Thomas, *The French Empire between the Wars: Imperialism, Politics and Society* (Studies in imperialism, Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2005), pp. 211–245.

39 Thierno Moctar Bah, 'Contribution à l'étude de la résistance des peuples africains à la colonisation. Karnou et l'insurrection des Gbaya (la situation au Cameroun 1928–1930)', *Afrika Zamani* 3 (1974), pp. 105–161.

Mbartoua to be perceived as a mythical figure in local history. In this case, too, the creation of the Mbartoua myth reveals a historical inventiveness that aims to maintain the Gbaya's grandeur in the region. This logic can be observed in the account of Mbartoua's death given by one of his great grandsons, Aiba Ngaré<sup>40</sup>:

Chief Mbartoua, indignant and heartbroken at seeing his impoverished population enslaved by the *zàmàn*, will set up operations to capture and poison the latter. This chief was endowed with supernatural powers that made him invisible to his opponent. The *zàmàn*, as the Gbaya called them, on seeing several of their own kind die or disappear set up an operation to capture Mbartoua; according to them, they could destabilize the Gbaya by executing their chief. Except that it was difficult for them to capture him because of his supernatural powers and his inaccessible cave barracks. The capture of the king's eldest son by the *zàmàn*<sup>41</sup> and the death of many in his community will push the chief to strip himself of his magical amulets. It was after this act that he was therefore executed by shooting.<sup>42</sup>

This version of Mbartoua's death presents him as a mystical warrior whose power is superior to that of the German army. In addition, it is stated that the chief decided to surrender to the colonizers to be executed. This shows that, contrary to the written sources, Mbartoua decided to surrender himself to death. This is proof that he remained master of his destiny by choosing when to die. This is the complete opposite of the accounts given in the written sources.

According to the latter, contrariwise, the Germans overcame Mbartoua's resistance.<sup>43</sup> From 1901 to 1903, Lieutenant Von Stein led two expeditions to east Kamerun that paved the way for the conquest of the Mbartoua chieftaincy. These expeditions had three objectives. First, Von Stein sought to avenge Plehn's death by subduing Mbartoua and his people. Second, it was a question of establishing headquarters in Bertoua to

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40 Aiba Ngaré is the current Gbaya community head in Bertoua. His father was Ngové, son of Ndiba Mbartoua.

41 German in Gbaya language.

42 Formal interview with Aiba Ngaré, Bertoua, 1.8.2021.

43 Ndanga Ngnantare and Ndanga, *L'identité Gbaya. Essai de reconstitution de l'histoire et les coutumes des Gbaya de l'Est du Cameroun* (above n.16), Dieudonné Ndanga Ngnantare, *When the Past becomes the Future : Aspects of Culture Revitalization Amongst The Gbaya in Bertoua, Eastern Cameroon*, MA Thesis, University of Tromsø, 2007; Bateranzigo, *Les Gbaya et les Kaka de l'Est-Cameroun* (above. n.18); Ludwig von Stein, *The Expedition on Bertoua* (Yaoundé National Archives, 1903).

coordinate colonial rule and actions in the region. Third and finally, Von Stein wanted to exploit local natural resources and boost trade. In August 1903, hostilities with the Gbaya commenced when Mbartoua refused to submit to Von Stein's authority. To organize his troops to drive out the German lieutenant, Mbartoua fled into the forest with his son Abo (who Mbartoua chose to be his heir). After two months of resistance, Mbartoua was killed on 12 October 1903, by a 'colonial soldier' near the village of Gunté in Gari-Pondo district after being betrayed by one of his sons<sup>44</sup> who had revealed his hiding place to German troops.

These two versions of Chief Mbartoua's death effectively demonstrate the mechanisms of the invention of oral tradition. This invention is the key to colonial memory among the Gbaya. The latter are distorting or fabricating historical knowledge about colonization to take advantage of circumstances by describing themselves as winners. In addition, they are more concerned with preserving their glorious past as warriors. On the other side, according to the 'colonial library' used to 'invent Africa',<sup>45</sup> it can be considered that the German colonizers have through their writing distorted and fabricated historical knowledge to express their domination. Mudimbe argues that during colonization, Westerners used to produce discourses and reflections on African cultures and societies that were the offspring of imperialism.<sup>46</sup> In others words, the types of discourses produced on Africa are characterized by the discrepancy between pictorial representation and social reality.<sup>47</sup> At least, it can be observed that despite the high-quality war strategies possessed by the Gbaya the military superiority of the Germans was no less important. The mastery and possession of sophisticated weapons of war by the latter allowed them to pacify the Gbaya and impose colonial rule locally.

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44 Historical Sources converge to validate that Mbartoua was betrayed by his son Ndiba Mbartoua, who became a German accomplice.

45 Valentin Yves Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana Press, 1988), p. 5.

46 Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa* (above, n. 45), pp. 4-5.

47 Amina Djouldé Christelle, 'Satirical Cyber-Pictoriality and Transcription of the Western Imagination on Sub-Saharan Africa: Colonial Persistence in the Post-Independence Era', in Jean-Bernard Ouédraogo, Mamadou Diawara, and Elísio Salvado Macamo (eds), *Translation Revisited. Contesting the Sense of African Social Realities* (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018), 426-56, here p. 429.

## Conclusion

It is clear that the colonial encounter between the Gbaya and the Germans contributed to the fall of the myth of the invincibility and superiority of this warrior people. The data presented here allow us to conclude that, among the Gbaya of east Cameroon, oral tradition is a source of information that makes it possible to share the local version of colonial domination. This colonial memory is the result of an invention of tradition. Indeed, the Gbaya preserve orally and pass on from generation to generation their developed understanding of colonial history. They have created orally adapted songs and epic tales to perpetuate the colonial experience they underwent. Thus, a local approach to colonial memory is developed, which is grafted onto a global approach to understanding the phenomenon in all its complexity. This complexity is based on the dual meaning that emerges from this way of constructing German colonial memory. On the one hand, oral literature as a material of history positions the Gbaya as heroes, brave warriors, and victors. On the other, it recognizes the power of the German colonialists but also its pernicious effects on Gbaya society. In any case, the materials evaluated here suggest that the Gbaya and the Germans did not peacefully cohabit with one another during the colonial era.

Initially, the arrival of the Germans was not ill-received by the Gbaya. This first contact was peaceful. But the Germans quickly made it clear that their intention was to colonize the local area and its people. The abuses inflicted on the Gbaya by the Germans established patterns of oppression and violence that weakened the harmony that had initially existed between these two groups. This inevitably led to conflict, as resulting in the subjugation of the Gbaya to the German colonial order. In essence, by perpetuating their own version of colonial history, the Gbaya are expressing herewith the pain of collective trauma. In reality, the Gbaya have not yet overcome their failure during this period. Observing the depth of this historical wound on Gbaya memory, I wonder whether these people could keep a low profile and think about a fruitful cooperation with Germany to spur reconciliation with their shared past.

## References

### *Main informants*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Given name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Profession</b>	<b>Date and place of interview</b>
Gabana Boundar	Constantin	74	Gbaya	M	Retired	30.8.2021, Bertoua
Boundar	Bernard	85	Gbaya	M	Farmer	30.8.2021, Bertoua
Yaziki	Simon	83	Gbaya	M	Retired	31.8.2021, Nganké
Aiba	Ngaré	82	Gbaya	M	Chief of Gbaya Community, Bertoua	1.9.2021, Bertoua
Baradoma	Adéline	36	Gbaya	F	Housekeeper	2.9.2021 Bertoua
Nando	Mariane	79	Gbaya	F	Housekeeper	4.9.2021 Nganké
Nangbengué	Ester	64	Gbaya	F	Housekeeper	6.9.2021 Bertoua