

SEEKING PEACE THROUGH BĚTI FUNERAL RITES IN SOUTH CAMEROON

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ABSTRACT Discourse intended to promote notions of peace and human rights in Cameroon, as well as elsewhere in Africa, appears to presuppose that these notions are part of models or practices acquired from elsewhere. Taking, as a basis for our study, the funeral rites of the Běti in Cameroon, our research aims to answer the following question: “In this era of globalization, how do Africans intend to restore and maintain peace in the continent and throughout the world?” Here, the Běti culture is simply used as an example for comparison with other Cameroonian or African cultures, as funeral rites exist in all cultures. The objective of this study was to demonstrate that social milieus have always nursed social values capable of promoting peace and mutual respect among individuals. Peace-promoting values in Běti society (dialogue, speech, the oath, sharing and the respect of time) are examined in the social context of the death of a head of household.

Key Words: Běti; Peace; Funeral rites; South Cameroon.

INTRODUCTION

Globalization seems to be a highly ambivalent reality (Paulet, 1998). It presents itself as a process of integration of cultures, one that brings people closer to each other. It is also a generator of many conflicts. In 1996, for example, around fifty conflicts were taking place worldwide: national wars (Temouls, Bosnia, Serbia), interethnic wars (Rwanda, Somalia), and religious wars (at the borders of Islamic nations). At question here is the contribution of anthropological Africa or African anthropology to this vast meeting area of give and take that is globalization and, in particular, to the quest to restore and maintain peace throughout planet Earth. Our reflections on seeking peace through the Běti funeral rites in South Cameroon are intended to address this major issue. This contribution will be based strictly on the anthropological dimension as a way to resolve conflict situations and maintain a sustainable peace culture.

In contrast to the societies and cultures of the Global North or the West, characterized by a social organization dominated by a supreme traditional leader, the society of the Běti in Cameroon functions without a real absolute head of its social organization. The western chiefdom and the lamidalism of the northern part of Cameroon, for example, are structures that integrate instances of responsibility for managing conflicts and the promotion of peace within society. Among the Běti, the configuration of society has an egalitarian tendency, which makes it difficult to put into place specific frameworks for conflict regulation within the social groups that make up the Běti. On the other hand, these groups make use of ritual practices (birth, marriage, death), which appear appropriate for the regulation of

social life.

The exploration of Bëti funeral rites gives us the opportunity to show that, among indigenous strategies of regulation and establishment of peace in sub-Saharan African societies, the Bëti prefer a community approach, reinforced by associated rites.⁽¹⁾

Living in Cameroon, the Bëti occupy a major part of the Central and South regions of the country. This group is made up of smaller groups, known as the Ewondo, Bane, Eton, and so on. The Pahouin group, in turn, is made up of the Bëti, the Bulu and the Fang. Totaling around two million people, the Bëti constitute a more or less homogeneous entity, as far as language and culture are concerned.

With regard to religion, the Bëti people belong to a social organization based on a hierarchical classification of social values. The organization of funeral rites appear here as a perfect illustration of this type of organization. There are separate funeral rites for a death by suicide and for a death caused by witch hunting; there are funeral rites appropriate for a bachelor without children, funeral rites for a child, and funeral rites for the head of a family (Mebenga Tamba, 1990). It is on this last category of funeral rites that this study focuses its attention. However, before tackling this issue, it is necessary to answer an important question: what type of peace (*mvœ*) do the Bëti seek through funeral rites? To answer this question, it is important to address the structure of this ethnic group. The Bëti clan is not a centralized power. It is a patrilineal society with a segmented lineage structure. In other words, it is the father who forms a lineage (*mvog*). The children (especially the sons) enjoy this privilege once they become adults: they are expected to create their own lineage, made up of their wives, children, and slaves (Laburthe-Tolra, 1985; Ombolo, 1981).

The basis of lineage constitutes the ideal social standard in Bëti country. Lineage gives its head direct power over his subjects. The expression of this power is seen in his acquisition of many wives, servants, and slaves. It is through hard work that the head of the lineage acquires and maintains power, riches, and prestige. An effective head of a lineage has wives, children, and goods, and all of these must be well managed for social stability to ensue. The death of the head of a family, lineage or clan, therefore, disrupts this social equilibrium and generates enormous problems (Mebenga Tamba, 1990: 55).

SOCIAL TENSIONS AND CHALLENGES TO PEACE

Social disharmony and challenges to peace emanate from the simple fact that the Bëti believe that each death has a cause. It is true that not every death is perceived in the same manner. According to the Bëti, all deaths are not the same. The death of an adolescent and that of an adult are perceived differently. A similar distinction is made between the death of a woman and that of a man, the death of a bachelor and that of a married man, the death of a head of a family with children and that of a head of a family without children, and the

death of a great entrepreneur and that of an idle man or a fugitive. Age, sex, offspring, and the level and quality of social achievements are a few of the many parameters used to judge the impact of a death, which can destabilize the peace of a community. Socially speaking, upon the death of an individual, a program of funeral rites is required with multiple functions; this program not only enables the deceased to join his/her ancestors in the other world but also strengthens or consolidates social ties within the community that has lost an important individual and part of the functioning of its system. In short, it is of the utmost importance to reinstate an organizational authority that will permit the restoration of social peace after the death of an important person.

Apart from the parameters referred to above, death has no meaning to the Bēti. When a man who was morally upright dies, he is considered a complete man, and a source of life for the entire community. The death of such a person instigates suspicion. In fact, according to this ethnic group, such a death must have a cause. There is always a way to castigate this unacceptable disappearance. It is therefore imperative for the cause of his death to be known. Zenker⁽²⁾ as reported by Laburthe-Tolra (1970: 61), has said, “The death of somebody is always linked to poisoning or witch-hunting”, and, therefore, it must be avenged to restore peace.

An examination of funeral rites gives us the opportunity to view social tensions among actors, possibly generated by social conditions. These tensions must be eliminated ritually if peace is to be restored to the social group. The tensions are, in the first instance, always caused by the nephews of the deceased.

I. Direct nephews (*bane kal*)

As in most sub-Saharan African societies, avuncularity (relationship between a maternal uncle and his direct nephew) is greatly developed and respected in the Bēti community. The nephews of the deceased are known together as *bane kal*. This class of children includes all the sons and daughters that a woman has given birth to within a marriage. Usually, the bond that these children share with the brothers of their mother has the following characteristics: the nephews communicate, joke freely and share a common goal with their uncle. When a maternal uncle dies, the nephews come to the funeral ceremony and protect the interests of their uncle. More than the nieces, the nephews are the ones who come into play here. This is because, in Bēti culture, female children go away to get married, and leave the family, while male children get married to women and remain in the village where they were born. The fact that nieces belong to their respective husbands' families stops them from having the same permanent bond with their maternal uncles as that entertained by their brothers, who reside close to their mothers.

The wrath of direct nephews is justified not only because of the special intimate bond that links them to their maternal uncle, as Ombolo (2003) rightly states, but also by the various advantages that they enjoyed with their uncle, who acted as a consoler, giving them much affection, even against the weight

of the authority imposed by the father (Laburthe-Tolra & Warnier, 1993: 94).

II. The sisters (*mingongon*)

The *mingongon* in the Bëti culture are the classificatory sisters of a man. This group is always active publicly during farewell ceremonies for brides and grooms immediately following on weddings and also during the weddings themselves. They are most often widows or divorced women living in the village. They may also be unmarried girls. Socially speaking, these women are considered to be on the lookout for new amorous adventures, so as to enable their family to enjoy the benefit of a dowry. The community also counts on them to create alliances and, especially, to form new social groups for the community.

As part of the funeral rites that concern the nephews, *mingongon* constitute a group of retributive agents whose action is to punish the guilty and bully those suspected to be the cause of the death of their brother. They curse the wives of the deceased. They believe that the death of the head of a family is always caused by his wives. This view of events by *mingongon* is not necessarily a fantasy, as some may think. It must be recalled that girls are called upon to leave their families to marry. Therefore, they leave vacuums in their immediate families. The attributes, interests, and considerations related to her social status are thus not taken into consideration. A sister sees the wife of her brother as someone coming to usurp her position in the family. A divorced woman, a widow who has returned to her village, or an old maid only discovers after the death of her brother that she has rights that allow her to claim and recover her lost position within the family. This is what justifies the tensions that disrupt social peace, and that are introduced by the *mingongon* as part of the funeral rites. The purpose of these rites is, therefore, to ease the tensions, so that peace can prevail (Mebenga Tamba, 1990: 103).

III. The succession of the deceased

In addition to the idea that the Bëti are suspicious of all deaths (death is always caused by someone), a belief that compels the nephews and sisters of the deceased to seek revenge, it is also the case that social peace is threatened by social tensions arising from problems relating to the management of the property of the deceased and access to his social functions and his succession. Many rivals put forward succession claims, playing false roles or using tricks to accede to the rank or social functions of the deceased.

1. The heir (*món-elig*)

The heir (*món-elig*) is the most prominent person in the funeral rites. He is the first son or another valiant son of the deceased. He is not self-appointed. Although there exist within the Bëti clan customary laws sanctioning succession rights when the head of the family dies, these laws contain flaws that may lead to social tensions, as pointed out by Effa (1974) in his study on devolution

among the Bëti.

The designation of the heir is always an opportunity for the community to witness scenes of tension manifest through shouts and quarrels. According to Bëti customary law, the eldest son is promoted to the rank of heir after the death of his father. In a polygamous household, the eldest son of the first wife is designated heir. If the deceased has no male offspring at all, then one of the brothers of the deceased will be called upon to play the role of the successor for a given period of time. All else being equal, this regulation does not include taking away ascendancy from its rightful owner if he does not yet have the necessary management skills for this function. Any boy child of the deceased may be asked to play this role if his legal, economic, and physical qualities permit him to do so. Disputed succession is often the main cause of social tensions among the Bëti today.

Indeed, heightened tension comes from the fact that the heir of the deceased, through the achievements of his late father, will be elevated to a higher socioeconomic status, thanks to the powers that the funeral rites for his late father carry and bestow on him. Through the enthroning ceremony, the heir receives the power and authority of his late father to carry on the human heritage that has been transferred to him; he is also given all the economic assets left by the latter to enable him to carry on the responsibilities of his late father. This is what prompts Laburthe-Tolra to say that:

If the eldest son does not master the art or science of taking care of people, if he is greedy and takes care only of his own wives while others under his care are starving, then the old widows of his father will go to any of their sons who can readily give them food. The most important thing for the old is their food. Also, if the eldest son cannot take care of his responsibility, it is said that he behaves like an old tobacco leaf, so his elig will dissolve and only the bad grass will remain there... (Laburthe-Tolra, 1985: 229)

This tirade, expressed in a parabolic style, emphasizes the fact the heir must know how to provide food for the family and that he will always have this duty. This is very important because it will help to calm the tensions induced by his new social status as heir. The inability of the heir to manage the power and authority bequeathed to him by his father is a fatal cause of the decadence of the heritage of the deceased.

2. The headman (*mot-dzal*)

As part of the funeral rites organized following the death of the head of a family without a child or having a very young boy child, the headman (*mot-dzal*) is automatically the chief representative of the natural family of the deceased. He is supposed to know better than anyone else the realities of the family of the deceased and the cause of death of the latter. The eldest brother of the deceased succeeds his late brother as the *mot-dzal*. However, this may

be altered if this eldest brother did not have a good relationship with the deceased. The right of succession can also be passed on to a group of people. Here also, much suspicion builds up among the members of that group as to what each member of the group will be assigned to do with regard to the management and use of the property of the deceased.⁽³⁾

The role of the *mot-dzal* requires certain qualities, without which, funeral rites may undermine peace in the family. Indeed, as part of his collaboration with the patriarch who presides over these rites, the *mot-dzal* is the spokesman of the village in general and of the deceased family in particular. He is the one who usually informs the entire community of the death, plans burial ceremonies, officially pronounces the cause of the death and, if necessary, reads the will, which reveals how the sharing of the legacy of the deceased will be carried out, stating also who has been chosen by the deceased as his successor. In short, this is therefore yet another role that requires exceptional qualities: a mastery of the problems within the deceased family and those of the community, knowledge of history and causes of death, and the ability to organize funerals. He must be fair and honest, and he must have a high sense of responsibility. Any failure of the *mot-dzal* in the conduct of funeral rites therefore disrupts order in the family. His intervention within the context of these rituals is to restore or consolidate this social order.

IV. Public complaints (*nsili awu*)

Through public complaints, known as *nsili awu*, people are able to demand that the cause of death of the deceased should be declared publicly, so that they can calm their anger. Public complaints constitute a cry of distress from all those who considered the deceased as the only gateway to the family. Now that he is no more, they are concerned over their fate. They make sure to mention it in their complaints. They worry about the future without the deceased, since the relationship is ended. Briefly, these complaints include those of the deceased nephews and maternal uncles, those of his sons-in-law, and those of his close friends.

Faced with all these sources of social tension that threaten the basis of peace in the community, the question one needs to ask here is: how do the Běti calm the storms that arise after the death of the head of a family?

BURIAL AND RESTORATION OF PEACE

Three burial practices are used to restore peace after the death of a community member: the holding of meetings before the funeral, the benediction rites, and provision of the funeral meals.

I. Secret meetings (*bisog*)

The quest for peace begins in the holding of secret meetings, the primary

purpose of which is to arrive at a consensus regarding tensions arising from the death of the family head. These meetings are not conducted in public, since the process of seeking peace must not encounter any obstacle or any hindrance. If something is not secret, it is disclosed, defamatory, vulgar, and exposed to destructive forces. The secrecy acts as a guarantee to protect a family that has been weakened or destabilized by grief. To restore a climate of peace to this family, discussions, procedures, and actions must be kept secret.

In this context, there are two types of secret meetings:

1. A secret family meeting (*esog-nda-bot*)

A secret family meeting (*esog-nda-bot*) is held in the house of the deceased on the day before his burial. Members of the family of the deceased come together in secret. In most Bēti families, this gathers the close relatives of the deceased. To be precise, it involves the biological brothers and sisters and their children, the nieces and nephews. The president of this meeting, who is always the headman (*mot-dzal*), assisted by the patriarch (*zomelo'o* or *ndzo*), presides over the next day's funeral ceremonies. The participants in this meeting discuss the various causes of death, the tensions that arise from this death, and the various moral and material resources available that could be used to give the deceased a fitting burial.

This meeting is the first forum for deliberation in which the self-examination of all members of the family of the life they have been living is carried out. Each family member who participates in this meeting must be animated by a spirit of unity, peace, dialogue, and reconciliation. This is manifested through moral, physical, and material support or through contributions made, and the group reaches a decision on how the funeral will be organized to ensure its smooth running. Interventions could overcome the constructive objectives of the participants. The attributes of honesty, responsibility, and justice on the part of the *mot-dzal*, and his perfect mastery of the history and standard of living of the family and the causes of the death, all have their place in the meeting. The effective presence of the patriarch (*zomelo'o* or *ndzo*), together with all his powers and protection against evil spirits or sorcerers (items contained in a magical bag, which he carries on his side during public meetings) constitute solid devices of support for the quest for peace during the holding of this discourse. Thus, every family member taking part in this meeting intends to promote peace, and no one is against the peace process.

2. The secret meeting of the clan (*esog-nnam*)

The second secret meeting (*esog-nnam*) is held on the day of the burial itself in a remote corner of the village where the funeral ceremony takes place. Unlike the first, it has a much wider audience. This dialogue gathers all the members of the lineage or clan, including those by alliance of the deceased and, especially, representatives of the patriarchs of the nearby villages with whom the members of the bereaved family have good social relationships and have reciprocal exchanges whenever there is a funeral.

The *esog-nnam* answers in a very calming and peaceful manner all the various public complaints that were raised two to three hours earlier. It makes the final decision concerning the issue of succession and the fate of the widow.

In real terms, considering the increased number of participants in this meeting, the objective is to restore social peace on the basis of proposals or judgment of conflicts from a lineage or clan point of view. Such a forum provides an opportunity for several sub-lineages and clans, objectively and in a spirit of cooperation and dialogue, to assess any situation that may threaten peace. For this reason, the conclusions arrived at in this meeting are made public in a remarkable style of oratory. The orator, while publicly making known the decisions of the meeting, emphasizes the great number of people involved in the extensive deliberations. The spokesman, in his speech, therefore, answers each query that was raised during the funeral rites ceremony, and he calls on the ancestors to witness the openness and honesty of the decision makers. Finally, the speech ends with a warning note, admonishing anyone who tries to go against the decision, and calls on the public to answer, several times, with a collective “yes” (*hééééé*) with regard to adopting this decision.

II. The benediction rite (*ebab*)

One year after the burial, a benediction rite is organized for the family. According to its etymology, *ebab* comes from the verb *abab*, which means massage (body); the purpose of this rite is to alleviate the spirits of the people affected by the death, enabling them to enjoy a peaceful and pleasant state of health. This ceremony nourishes the relationship between the living and the dead through speech. Hence, it has highly religious attributes. Here we set out the steps of the rite, as they were presented in a previous work:

After having the deceased's family sit in queues and on the ground, barefooted, the officiating noble, assisted by other patriarchs, representatives of the entire lineage, begins with a stormy speech. He reminds each of the family members sitting, of the facts and effects of his/her conduct in the family. For each case, if it is about a bad or an evil spell that has to be cast out, he calls on the spirit of the deceased head of family, submits the case to him and requests his understanding of the will of the patriarchs to banish this evil from the community. On behalf of all, he invokes the evil spirits and asks all present to say a collective yes, in order to adopt the resolution. Then the next case is handled in this way until all seated family members go through the process (Mebenga Tamba, 1990: 164).

In some Bëti groups, this ritual is carried out in a thick forest, far away from the general public, where the few patriarchs of the lineage can extend peace to the family, away from the wizards hidden among the general public who can use this opportunity to counteract their action.

Moreover, the choice of a bush setting matches very well with the Bëti culture, since this ceremony operates in close collaboration with death, considered as the source of survival for the living. The dead mainly reside in the forest. Aware of the presence of their ancestors in the ceremony, the patriarchs in charge of conferring the blessing never fail to sacrifice a goat to them.

III. Funeral meal

The first public funeral meal (*kabad edzeb mbim*) is offered after the burial ceremony. Everyone is invited to take part in the meal: nephews, sisters, widows, and the heir, as well as people who are suspected to be the murderers. Briefly, all those affected by the death are called upon to share in the meal. The meal is itself a sign of the calming of tensions. It is even more so when enemies, belligerents, or at least those considered to be such, dip their hands into the same dish. Depending on the circumstances, the various ethnic groups that make up the Bëti group are given a second meal, a meal that wards off death (*ekuli kon*), nine or eighteen days later. The last meal, known as the funeral banquet (*eyama awu*), the most sumptuous, is eaten within a period of at most one year after the death, in a bid to finally calm the dead spirit and restore peace in the family and community through the benediction rite ceremony.

The cooked goat (*kabad edzeb mbim*) is cut up and shared with the brothers of the deceased so as to strengthen ties within the family. In the second meal, known as *ekuli kon*, a variety of food cooked in the same pot is consumed collectively and in communion with the deceased. Meat and wine are shared with various clans and lineages during the *eyama awu* (ritual farewell meals due to death or a great funeral). This meal is a gesture full of wishes for peace, love, and solidarity. The symbolism of collective meals, consumed over the course of days with a low intensity of sunlight, and the desire to stay in touch with the deceased and ancestors during the meals, bespeak full participation in the quest for social peace within the family after a death.

THE TRADITIONAL BASIS FOR PEACE

From the foregoing, it can be seen that there exist a number of implicit elements that make up the basis of peace in traditional Bëti society. In this section, these elements of the Bëti funeral rites are examined one by one. Peace among the Bëti has the following important prerequisites: dialogue, speech, the oath, sharing, and time.

I. Dialogue

Dialogue comes into play during the two secret meetings prior to the burial. Two principal tendencies, often referred to as “vertical and horizontal”, are found

in dialogue that takes place in the meetings.

As an aspect of the horizontal tendency, we can see dialogue between the members of the bereaved family and the custodians of ritual power over the restoration of social relationships disrupted by death, redefining roles vis-à-vis the new heir and successor of the deceased, to ensure harmonious family life after the burial. Among the Bëti, this involves a community tribunal that puts two camps into communication: namely, bereaved family members are faced by a group of patriarchs representing not only the deceased's clan but also those of other, neighboring clans with whom the deceased's clan maintains good social relationships. In this situation, family members are required to present major problems (chronic diseases, lack of success in socioeconomic activities, curses, conflicts, and internal tension) that were declared and present before the death of the family head, but which now carry the risk of being intensified or perpetuated with the disappearance of the latter. The patriarchs concerned with this dialogue register all these problems, and conduct a dialogue amongst themselves, gathering all appropriate advice and adopting rituals of blessing or cleansing for each mentioned case.

There is also a vertical tendency of the dialogue, which occurs between the living and the dead, as part of a communication system between the living and the ancestors set up to seek occasional assistance. In this context, dialogue no longer seeks strong community action or intervention by patriarchs but, instead, opts for ancestral powers. The Bëti exploit this opportunity of ritual funerals to organize, among the graves of the deceased, a specific ceremony of *ebab* (benediction rites). After having audited the vital problems of the family of the deceased in various dialogues, the patriarchs initiate mystical communication with the ancestors, calling upon them to come and support the resolution for peace. There will be reconciliation and success, which will be made public in the interest of those concerned. The type of dialogue established between the patriarchs and the ancestors is consolidated by acts of ritual invocation (spraying with mixtures of grass and fruits to bring the virtues of peace or purification) performed by the patriarchs for those concerned at the burial place.

Dialogue here is an essential prerequisite in the search for peace, in so far as it brings together various conflicting or discordant parties. Dialogue brings them together and allows them to express themselves, to justify themselves, to understand each other and, eventually, to forgive each other to create a new life together.

II. Speech

Taking part in the mourning ceremonies allows us to see how verbal communication is used at all stages of the funeral rites. It is demonstrated through the gestures, actions, and words that give the funeral ritual all its power. It is pronounced at the beginning of the rite, it accompanies the rite, and it concludes the rite. For the purposes of social peace, verbal communication is accompanied by gestures and actions that create a strong impact for the message to be relayed

during the performance of a funeral ritual. The difference here is that the words uttered in the form of speech are distinguished by their hermetic nature, reserved for insiders who are able to decode them. It is this hermetic nature of speech that helps it retain all its intended value and, above all, avoid being altered by other forces or destructive pressures.

In a study of the art and power of oratory in Africa, Mbarga identified a framework of speech openings among the Bëti (Mbarga, 1997: 30–68). Among these, he cites funerals as an appropriate framework for the manifestation of the power of speech. There is a manifestation of power during the sequence of the *nsili awu* (public complaint of the causes of death), the *esok* (holding of dialogue), and the *ndong awu* (funeral recitation). In each of these sequences, the study demonstrates that the orators intervene one by one to formulate their complaint on the causes of death, speaking a funeral recitation that mediates a judgment of the life of the deceased. Briefly, the study concludes,

...the path of the framework of speech giving of the Bëti brings to light its ritual character and existence... disputes, diseases, and death pose vital concrete problems studied by the orator. Their interventions, which act out solving a problem, conspiring for evil or oppressing the death, are all animated by the same goal: that of the blossoming of the human life in society. Bëti oratory, without any doubt, seduces, wins, and convinces... The Bëti goes right up to reconciliation, to the ennoblement of man in his personal destiny and that of his society. This is the essential vocation of the oratory art of the Bëti. (Mbarga, 1997: 33)

As far as the characteristics of the Bëti speech is concerned, this researcher has explored the cultural reality of the people to demonstrate and affirm that speech is:

- A dialogue (a kind of question-exchange, a call for responses);
- A gestural work (life experience of the thinker's expression);
- A sapient work (support of a problem or given situation);
- A vital work (takes on the life of a man and his problems);
- An esthetic work (through diverse figures and styles);
- A religious work (sacred words, words of life).

Therefore, as was recognized by psychoanalysis, as a proven therapeutic method, speech soothes vengeful spirits. It is not only in Africa that diverse cultures acknowledge the power of speech (Mbock, 1984): speech creates, transforms, and destroys what already exists. Speech saves, it has the power to manage men, restore, and maintain peace among Africans. Traditional European society has, for a long period of time, carried out research into peace so as to be able to explain the curious behavior of European people (Favret-Saada, 1985). Religious groups (Christian, Islamic, Buddhist, and others) make use of speech as a real weapon of faith, a promoter of reconciliatory terms, and a promoter of love and peace among men.

III. The oath

Since seeking peace through the benediction rite (*ebab*) involves the dead, when a statement is made, it cannot be retracted. Once a word is spoken, once a promise is made or a covenant sealed, it cannot be reviewed.⁽⁴⁾ There is no Bëti rite that can be performed without oath-taking, which is a global and universal practice of promoting peace. Within the framework of research on funerals among the Bëti, the practice of the oath has been presented as follows:

...as all good judgments end with oath-taking, the solution of succession problems and that of heritage during Ewondo (Bëti) funeral rituals ends up most often with oath-taking: *ekan son ai meki me kabad* (swearing on the blood of a goat). This involves drinking the fresh blood of a goat mixed with wild grass by the heir and his family after the statutory lineage publication on the heritage and succession. Through this gesture (swearing in), nobody has the right again to revoke the decisions taken, at the risk of being afflicted by a terrible illness or even dying (Mebenga Tamba, 1990: 206).

The taking of an oath with the blood of a goat, practiced during funeral rites, is not the only form of oath taking among the Bëti. The jurist Doumbe Miulongo describes the most usual form among the majority of the Bantu of Cameroon:

“I swear on the grave of my dead father (or of my dead mother) that what I declare is the nothing but the truth”. This statement is often accompanied by gestures that involve the lifting up of the right hand, pointing three fingers of the hand in the air away from the little finger (Doubmé Moulongo, 1972: 25).

We find a close relationship between this form of oath-taking and the practice of some Christian churches (the three fingers in the air). Oath-taking during funeral rites follows a path that gives it value and enables the attainment of the final objective: peace seeking. For the one who swears, he must first of all pronounce a statement resembling a confession, a submission, and then make a symbolic gesture of witness by superior forces, namely those of the ancestors. It is necessary to add to this framework the deep meaning of the symbolism of the blood of a sacrificed animal. The use of gestures linked to the consumption of the mixture of herbs already mentioned above, the statements offered by the one who takes an oath and the collective vocal responses of assistance (perfect agreement of the community) show the power that the Bëti give to oath-taking in conflict resolution and the installation of social peace.

IV. Sharing

Lack of access to local resources and their management are the main sources

of hidden or open conflicts in today's world. The resolution of these conflicts can occur through sharing, as in the Bëti funeral rites.

Sharing is an act of love; it is a consequence of forgiveness, and he who shares makes peace with the one he hurt. Sharing also implies acceptance of an unproblematic common life in the community with the one who was hurt. In the organization of funerals, sharing is first of all between family members and the deceased: through a ritual meal with the dead, the family performs an act of peaceful separation, which is a form of reconciliation. At the first level of sharing, we take note of the degree of the kinship links that the various members of the family had with the deceased. Usually, living animals (sheep and goats), traditional and bottled drinks, and dishes of prepared food are offered to the brothers in the patrilineage, family members by alliance, nephews, and others. This is referred to as "The last meal in the family that we share with a brother or a deceased relative".

Sharing also takes place between the grieving family and the neighborhood. It is the second level of relationships and debates, between the families and nearby communities, that dictates the quality of the meals offered. At its base, there is the principle of gift and counter-gift: families and neighboring communities receive offers in respect of the deceased, receiving them because the deceased also took part in funerals in his lifetime. The offer of a meal (preparing and giving drinks of all sorts) appears here as an honorable reimbursement of a social debt through the forging of relationships and socioeconomic exchanges that link the bereaved family with its neighbors.

By accepting participation in the funeral proceedings and sympathizing and share meals with the bereaved, the grieving family and neighbors come together to strengthen their ties. That is how peace is restored within the community.

V. Time

The search for peace does not happen in a day. The negotiation of peace takes time. Therefore, this process, by means of the Bëti funeral rites, extends over a period of at least one year, until the consumption of the last funeral banquet (*eyama awu*).

According to the Bëti cultural universe, time (*abok*) means, literally, to 'dig into the deeper meaning' (Mviena, 1970). Time, among the Bëti, is characterized by two phases: the day (*amos*) and the night (*alu*). The night, through its deep darkness, is perceived as a space that gives an opportunity to evil-doers to carry out their bad activities under the influence of evil powers. The day unfolds in many stages (the morning (*kikidigi*), midday (*ntobena amos*), and evening (*ngogogele*)) that are exploited during funeral rites with regard to the degree of luminousness and climatic sensation that these moments offer (Nkawa, 2010). In moments of much heat and light, the blessing, purification, and exorcism rites of peace must be carried out, either very early in the morning, towards midday, or during the afternoon, when the places in which the ancestral spirits are supposed to come and share the ritual ceremonies of the living are 'soft'.

The importance of two manifestations of time should be noted: time as duration and time as the moment. Time as duration refers to a procedure that must be followed to undertake the process of achieving peace with success. Taking time to make peace ensures the effectiveness and sustainability of the peace. Time as the moment means the favorable dispositions made to advance the peace process. The moments chosen to perform the funeral rites and the site chosen for the ritual are key indicators that guarantee that the peace sought will actually be obtained.

CONCLUSION

The exploration of the Bëti funeral rites has given us the opportunity to examine indigenous strategies for the regulation and establishment of peace in sub-Saharan African societies; among these strategies, the Bëti privilege a community approach, heavily reinforced by associated traditional rites.

The objective of the paper was to demonstrate that social milieus have always nursed social values capable of promoting peace and respect for individuals. In this respect, some fundamental elements of peace in Africa have been highlighted. “Dialogue” is the first sign of unity, and brings together disagreeing parties. Then, there is “speech”; it plays a dual role as creator and transmitter of peace. The third element is “the oath”, which is a form of commitment guaranteeing the obligation to make and keep peace. Further, we have “sharing”, which works to extend peace to others around us. Finally, “time” is the frame through which long-sought peace is obtained.

In this study, we highlighted traditional values directly linked to Africa, a continent that has been, unfortunately, marred by deadly conflicts and destabilizing social tensions. This is our contribution not only to Africa, whose people are killing each other, but also to all the conflicts in the world. Africa, therefore, has something to contribute to this vast give and take called globalization. Africa has much to offer the world. It is therefore in the interest of all not to let this continent, now that Western powers are out of the picture, fall apart. Traditional social values remain, in most cases, as a source of inspiration for harmonious contemporary life.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS This paper is based on my paper presented at the “4th International Forum: Conflict and Coexistence” organized by Kyoto University and University of Yaoundé I, December 5–6, 2014. The Forum was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number 23221012.

NOTES

- (1) This article presents some results of research that I have been carrying out in Cameroon since 1985; this work has already enabled me to present and defend two theses: a “Doctorat de 3e Cycle” in 1991 and a “Doctorat d’Etat” in 2007, at the University of Yaoundé and the University of Yaoundé I, respectively.
- (2) George August Zenker was born into an educated German family. A botanist by training, he was engaged by the German company Woerman for an expedition to Africa. In July 1884, Zenker arrived in Cameroon through the Nachtigal not only to carry out botanic research but also to occupy an important post in the colonial administration as chief of station in Yaoundé,
- (3) A local journal (*Le Combattant-hebdo* N°185 du 19/06/1987) published something related to this title regarding an issue of succession in neighborhood in Yaoundé-Cameroon. After the death of the family head, a policeman, the case was taken to court implicating the sister of the deceased, his concubine, and the son of the deceased. The attribution of land title was the origin of the conflict.
- (4) During seminars held between 1985 and 1998 in Paris, including anthropologists, historians, and philosophers, it was observed that swearing not only enables an individual to communicate with outside powers but is also used in his social and judicial life, with regard to distinct functions: it reinforces the construction of fraternities, professional or political bodies, offers engagements between individuals, it reveals, proves, or confirms truth in justice.

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————— Accepted *December 28, 2015*

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