Opening Political Space in Cameroon: the Ambiguous Response of the Mbororo

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This article discusses the impact of national democratic movements and economic crisis on internal political and social change in Mbororo pastoralist society, North West Province, Cameroon. *Pulaaku*, a Mbororo code of behaviour based on Mbororo distance, self-control, individuality, and racial ‘purity’, is discussed in relation to the difficulties Mbororo society has in responding to internal divisions as population explosion and land pressure spell the demise of the basis of their former existence. *Pulaaku* is also seen as a form of traditional, cultural, resistance, both to the other, settled ethnic groups in the North West Province and to active integration into the Cameroon state and political system. Mbororo society has difficulty adjusting to the new, uncertain politics of active participation and debate. The article discusses the aims, fortunes and internal ambiguities of a new Mbororo organisation – Mboscuda – which, responding to the meeting of ethnic and state identities, attempts to provide both a democratic forum for the problems in Mbororo society and a voice for the Mbororo in a new, volatile, political arena.

Banso, Bui Division, North West Province Cameroon: in a whitewashed government building on a hillside overlooking the market town of Banso, sit a group of fifty Mbororo men and one woman from various regions of the country, heads bowed in an earnest, concentrated silence as they listen to the words of the District Officer (DO) of Banso who is excitedly giving his opinions as to the reasons for 'Mbororo backwardness':

> You Mbororo people are tearing yourselves apart instead of coming together like the rest of Cameroon. You call yourselves an abandoned people? Who abandoned you? You abandoned yourselves! – Keeping away from others – keeping away from Me! How do you expect me to understand you when you keep away from me, keep away from others – when we are all here in the towns and you remain away from us, away from everything, away from me – up in the hills out there in the Bush!!

It is difficult to discern the reaction of the ten to fifteen elderly Mbororo leaders, who have agreed to be present at the meeting to this onslaught. Lined up on benches against the wall of the building, they smile patiently, gracefully, silently and clap, when the now out of breath DO finishes his speech and collapses in his chair of honour, proceeding to sleep throughout the rest of the meeting. ‘We have been psychologically defeated ...’ laments Musa Ndamba, provincial coordinator of
Mboscuda, the newly formed social movement for the ‘social and cultural development’ of Mbororo pastoralist peoples in Cameroon. It is Mboscuda who have called this meeting in Banso.

**Introduction**

The purpose of this article is to discuss the relation between processes of change and conflict in a modernising, democratising Cameroon upon the lives of Mbororo pastoralists in North West Province. I shall discuss the significance of the changing nature of Mbororo identity, as the identity of a pastoralist people with a profound sense of ethnic identity is brought increasingly into contact with new identities, and as Mbororo people become participants in a modernising state. I shall also discuss the impact of openings in political space, where new freedoms of expression appear to have accentuated long standing conflicts of land and power and intensified internal conflicts between new and old identities in Mbororo society.

Much of the work for this article was carried out from March to June 1993 in what was one of the first largely sedentary Mbororo communities in North West Province. Sabga, a Mbororo settlement since the early 1920s and now a community of 2,000, mostly Mbororo inhabitants, is situated on the edge of the one of the slopes of the Bamenda highlands, on a cliff top overlooking the densely populated Ndop plain. The ‘Ring Road’ that in the dry season joins all the major rural centres of the North West together, cuts through Sabga. Sabga people see their community as a centre of focus for the Mbororo in the region. Their settlement is the home of a traditional authority now called a ‘Lamido’.

Conflicts with the outside world are not new to the Mbororo, but the new forms of internal and external pressure that this community faces, caught between an increasingly difficult pastoral lifestyle and the explosive influence of a modernising Cameroon (evidence of which rumbles through Sabga on the North West Ring Road every day), mirror in microcosm the conflicts facing Mbororo society in the Province, as a whole. The opening of political space does however provide opportunities for Mbororo expression in new political arenas, in part through the creation of a new social movement for the Mbororo people – the Mbororo Social and Cultural Development Association – Mboscuda.

**Democratic Struggle in Cameroon**

The history of what is now called Cameroon is one of heterogeneous and changing networks of peoples and political structures, marked by people’s mobility and sophisticated, interrelated politics and trade patterns. The complexity of these networks of peoples and their political structures was in many cases reduced by the structured modalities of Western thought: ‘regional divisions’, and ‘ethnic groups’, were ‘unified’ in a national Cameroon state after first German and then French and British occupation (Nkwii & Warnier, 1982; Nkwii, 1987; Bayart, 1993).

‘The Cameroons’ as they were called before independence were previously British and French mandated territories, taken from the Germans during World War One. The Anglo-French division, and the different forms of colonial administration with which the two powers sought to prepare the Cameroons for independence, has served to constitute the national political identities of Anglophone and Francophone Cameroonians, as they call themselves today. The North and South West Provinces that border Nigeria were before independence under the control of the British
Nigerian colonial administration. They are now eager to stress their version of Cameroon history where, as they remember it, British Cameroon was loosely governed as an eastern province of Nigeria, with a ‘House of Chiefs’ and with local politicians given a fair degree of self-determination and thus ‘experience of democracy’. The French, however, established a sophisticated bureaucratic system of their own over the heads of traditional leaders and clamped down on local political parties (Foncha interview, May 1993). Amongst the Anglophones, Anglophone-ness and what is commonly spoken of as their threatened ‘Anglo Saxon heritage’, has become a major focal point for political identity (All Anglophone Standing Committee, 1993:5).

In the 1960s and 1970s Cameroon was heralded as one of the most promising West African states. Rich in natural and mineral resources, the economy was growing rapidly and export markets (palm oil, cocoa, coffee, tea and cotton) were good. Oil discovered off the south west coast promised to make Cameroon less dependent upon its big brother neighbour, Nigeria. Politically, it seemed to fulfil all criteria for Huntington-style ‘strong state’ development (Huntingdon, 1971). The federal system of government proposed at independence had looked to ways of alleviating post-colonial ethnic tensions and loyalties, providing space for the independent development of the different regions. It was abolished in 1972. The national political forum in Cameroon was soon restricted to the privileged elites who belonged to first president Ahmadou Ahidjo’s circles of patronage. Political stability under force then accompanied Cameroon’s early economic prosperity (Foncha interview, 1993).

Towards the end of the decade, the transparency of national financial dealings became more cloudy. Figures as to the direction of oil profits in the late seventies remain a well kept state secret. In spite of this, in this period of relative prosperity there does seem to have been a ‘trickling down’ of spoils to Cameroonians in the countryside through channels of patronage and personal relationships. Cameroon’s subsequent economic decline is only partially a result of the fall in aggregate demand and recession of the early 1980s (from which it has not been able to recover). Extensive mismanagement and misappropriation of national resources, capital flight and political patronage, whilst also a feature of Ahidjo’s regime, took new turns under Paul Biya after he succeeded Ahidjo in the early 1980s. The over-inflated, French-backed Cameroon CFA franc made its exports and locally produced goods expensive in comparison, for example, to imported French dairy products, undermining new Mbororo attempts to organise the selling of milk at local markets. By the early 1990s the economic crisis had reached a level at which the government was unable to pay its own employees. Many civil servants in the North West Province had not been paid for a year at the time of research.

The present much used expressions of ‘accountability’ and ‘transparency’ ought perhaps to be seen in this light. What seems to have happened under Biya is that as state resources dwindled, the numbers enjoying state patronage became a very restricted group who, now under attack from ‘moral’ democrats, found it necessary to employ more ingenious technologies to hide their accumulation of the dwindling state resources from the rest of society. New demands for ‘transparency’ may then mean more a reform (in line with the rule of law) of the complex systems of patronage in Cameroon than a complete change of system; ‘accountability’ may mean little more than the fulfilling by rich patrons of their responsibilities to their clients. Are some Cameroonians then more interested in a reopening of these same systems of patronage, so that a larger number of the population can get a share of the ‘national cake’ (Bayart, 1993)?
Political Space

By ‘opening of political space’, I mean the new opportunities for political expression in Cameroon society that have arisen from the Biya regime’s bending to pressure for liberal democratic reform. Freedoms of association and expression have opened the floor for new forms of political power and influence in the nation. There were of course underground voices of dissent in the national political arena and in exile, during the Ahidjo years and during Biya’s rule in the 1980s. However, the efforts of these voices were tightly organised and directed against the ruling powers of the Cameroon state. There does not seem to have been the ‘space’ for other popular political discourses in arenas of a Cameroon ‘civil society’ (such as those centred around the rights of specific ethnic groups, the rights of women, etc). The opening of political space and new freedoms of association in Cameroon in the 1990s has had the effect that although political discourses are still largely dominated by state powers/opposition party dichotomies, there is also room for other forms of political expression, such as the Anglophone movement and the Mbororo organisation, Mboscuda.

By concentrating on these ‘new’ openings in political space I do not mean to imply that political expression is something new to the people of Cameroon or that with the advent of democratisation processes that previously passive Cameroon peoples have suddenly come alive. Nor do I mean that these new spaces for political expression in the arenas (imaginary or otherwise) of multi-party state politics and debatably ‘civil society’ in Cameroon are necessarily a more effective or more legitimate means of fulfilling the demands of the heterogeneous peoples of Cameroon than the already existing political systems that, although under attack, continue alongside and indeed within these ‘new’ arenas of political expression.

The democratisation process and openings of new political space in Cameroon by Biya came at a time when few Cameroonians were untouched by the economic crisis. The opening of institutionalised politics to include genuine opposition parties and the reluctant acceptance of a free press in the early 1990s have started processes in Cameroon society that the present regime is having difficulty keeping under control. The sheer number of tabloids on the streets that are critical of the government, although fewer now than in the euphoric days before the last elections, reflect an enthusiasm with which Cameroonians participate in these new arenas with the discussion of state affairs, the latest scandals and miscarriages of justice. The messages of the local media are categorical, sensational, and are eagerly discussed in taxis, buses, bars and eating houses.

Although (perhaps, even because) the movements by the Biya regime towards an institutionalised liberal democracy are far from complete, discourses of democracy and rights have also opened the door for a variety of new forms of popular political organisation and association. This would seem in line with Bjorn Beckman’s earlier comment that

For a growing number of the African left, the struggle for liberal democratic rights has become an important platform for fighting repression and for widening the democratic space within which popular and democratic organisations can survive and develop (Beckman, 1989).

The ability of these new arenas of political expression to generate change on a national level is however contained by the immobility of the present government. The Biya
regime and state apparatus seem unable to respond to the new demands from below that are the direct consequence of political changes it has itself initiated.

The minority western provinces of Cameroon that were under British mandate have long been a breeding ground for dissent against what is perceived to be Francophone dominance. North West Province with its capital Bamenda is the centre of this dissent and a major target for government displays of might and human rights abuses (Herbert interview, 1993). Political figures in the North West and South West Provinces have now joined forces in an ‘All Anglophone Movement’ for a return to the federal decentralised government that Ahidjo abolished in 1972 (‘All Anglophone Standing Committee’, 1993). The largely Francophone regime has been unwilling to discuss this issue as it would mean, apart from anything else, discussion of the right to administer Cameroon’s oil reserves, located off the South West coast. According to Anglophone political commentators, a threat of secession looms beneath the surface (Ibid.).

The presidential elections held in November 1992 are widely believed, especially in the North West Province, to have been won by the opposing Social Democratic Front candidate, John Fru Ndi. The refusal of Biya to relinquish power, his subsequent declaration of a state of emergency and the human rights abuses by the military and gendarmes against opposition supporters and North West Province residents in the closing months of 1992 (Bobga, 1993; Foncha, 1993) provoked further opposition from people on the street.

The Mbororo Fulani: Culture and Identity
The Fulani are a dispersed, heterogeneous, group of largely pastoralist peoples, numbering about six million and spread with their cattle and their horses over much of West Africa, from Senegal and Mali in the far west, over to Central Africa, to Chad and the Central African Republic. Cameroon Fulani see themselves as divided into two broad groups: the first being ‘Fulbe’ or ‘town Fulanis’ who have been resident in Cameroon for longer than their nomadic or semi-nomadic Mbororo cousins and have their power base in the North. Former president Ahidjo claimed Fulbe descent, and although his supporting factions have been purged after a coup attempt against Biya in the early 1980s, the Fulbe remain a strong, regional political force. They have intermingled with the local peoples, many of whom have been forced to assimilate their lifestyle and Islamic religion, a process termed ‘Fulbeisation’ (Burnham, 1991). The Fulbe, and those who have sought to associate themselves with them, speak a slightly different version of the Fulani language, Fulfulde, to the Mbororo, or second main category of Fulani, who are the subject of this article (Burnham, 1991:79).

The ‘Mbororo’ arrived in Cameroon from the West only at the end of the last century. They are said to comprise 12 per cent of the present Cameroon population of over 12 million people (Mboscuda, 1993). The Mbororo of the Bamenda Plateau, North West Province are estimated to number 120,000 (Django & Mzeka, 1993:1), and arrived in the region in the early 1900s, from Adamawa further to the north (Burnham, 1991:85; Zinchem, nd; Michener, 1966). The Mbororo speak of themselves as further divided into two groups, their names corresponding with the types of cattle traditionally raised. The Jafun, like those in Sabga, have traditionally large dark brown cattle and came to North West Province at the beginning of the 1920s. The Aku with small white black-nosed cattle have been in the region for the last fifty years or so. Within these groups are several distinct family clans; the North West Jafun are further divided into ten clans or koen, those resident in Sabga being called Goshi.
The Mbororo in West Africa are traditionally nomadic or semi-nomadic pastoralists, cattle herders where practically all aspects of traditional identities lead back to the cow. They are the group of Fulani that have been most resistant to change and were the last to embrace the Islamic faith. The North West Mbororo are becoming more sedentary, coming together in larger communities with better access to schools and health facilities. Other Mbororo, those young men who do appear able to assimilate into town life, acquire unskilled labour jobs and take on new identities as part of a town market system. They return to the compounds with new knowledge, and values and are ‘buying out’ traditionally female spheres of influence: buying the family provisions; buying modern medicine from the hospital; buying new zinc roofs for the compound; making decisions about the (mainly male) children’s (western/arabic) education. Often young men’s greater knowledge of the Koran is used to justify these changes. In one of the few visible indicators of Islamic influence in sedentary Mbororo society, married women are no longer permitted to travel to the market to sell milk and buy provisions.

Mbororo Society and the World Outside

The problems facing Mbororo society today are a combination of the inescapable influence of outside political and economic pressures and the apparent inability of Mbororo society to counter these pressures or resolve the problems that they create from within. Most Mbororo would point to external factors as constituting the main threats to their society and causes of their problems. However, conflicts between Mbororo other ethnic groups in the Province have been building up over many years. This is reflected in the terms they use of each other: ‘Natives’ and ‘Fulanis’, which date back to the language of colonial surveys and are used as commonly as the more neutral ‘farmers’ and ‘grazers’ by both groups. The dichotomy allows the ‘Fulani’ to maintain their claim to racial and cultural distinction (as does the more derogatory Fulfulde term haabe for farmers), and allows the ‘Natives’ to regard the ‘Fulani’ as foreign immigrants with less rights to land than themselves.

The Mbororo have traditionally maintained a distance from their settled ‘black’ ‘Native’ neighbours, viewing their farming activities with silent disdain. The distinctive physical appearance of the Mbororo (pale skinned, tall, slender and long nosed) is an important feature of their traditional identity and they are at pains to distinguish themselves from other neighbouring ethnic groups. They have been largely endogenous, marrying often within their own clan to prevent division of their wealth and protect bloodlines (Adebayo, 1991:2; Django & Mzeka, 1993:4). A corresponding aura of mystique has grown around them and the way that the Mbororo have been constituted from outside. They have become the subject of myths and folk tales among the other inhabitants of the North West Province where Mbororo wealth has been much envied by their neighbours and often exaggerated. The settled farmers resented the good relations the Mbororo had with the British colonial administration and feared that they would use their wealth to take land they saw as their own. Reports of the pre-independence, Fulani-Native relationships speak of ‘Fulaniphobia’ on the part of the settled population (Njeuma & Awaso, 1988:466).

Pulaaku: ‘Making like a Fulani’

The Mbororo have a code of behaviour called pulaaku, or ‘to make like a Fulani’ (Burnham, 1991; Reisman, 1977). It represents a ‘fuzzy’ (Kaviraj 1991:51), ambiguous ‘cluster of identity’ (Jensen & Turner 1992:4) of ‘Mbororoness’, encompassing for the
Mbororo a profound, racial otherness, reserve, pride, a sense of shame, honour, discretion, self-control, not raising one's voice or rising to a conflict, not showing others what one has in mind or revealing one's real desires. Ideas of pulaaku affect, to a greater or lesser extent, most Mbororo social relationships. Pulaaku rests partially on the Fulani's idea of themselves as a cultivated people with control over their own needs and independent from all others. It is often defined negatively, by contrasting 'making like a Fulani' to the behaviour of the 'Natives' or haabe.

The part of Mbororo identity that relates to 'making like a Fulani' contains on the one hand superior otherness and cultural resistance to the world of the 'Native' peoples outside. Whilst I consider debates of ethnicity and colonial-inspired tribal 'false consciousness' to be largely irrelevant (a starting point for our work has been the Mbororo's own present day historical reality), concepts of specific Mbororo otherness do seem to date back further than many other colonial-imposed 'tribal' divisions. They seem to be more of a process of older historical antagonisms, such as conflicts with the settled haabe. Pulaaku contains, on the other hand, codes of reserve and distance in relation to other Mbororo. Perhaps concepts of pulaaku suited the rather isolated, individualistic nature of semi-nomadic life. Mbororo people have traditionally remained geographically apart from rural centres and detached from other Mbororo as necessary for their form of pastoralism, living with their close family in small clusters of huts, in the hills. Cattle have in the past been kept together in family herds. Collective grazing has a mixed success rate.

Pulaaku is also something that Mbororo feel it necessary to 'make' in the company of other Mbororo, a show of 'Fulaniness'. Whilst many see pulaaku as an overridingly positive characteristic, some of the new generation, the mobile and the business minded see it as hindering direct communication and the speedy resolution of affairs. In the words of a titled Mbororo and president of a small dairy cooperative:

_We ask at the meeting if there is a problem with what we want to do and they all say 'Halawala – no problem'. We ask again if there are problems and they say 'Halawala – no problem'. We then make resolutions. Later we find that nothing happens because of some big problem that nobody wants to talk about._

The common retort 'Don't make pulaaku!' is often a joke, sometimes an irritable threat. Although Mbororos take possessive pride in their Fulaniness or Mbororo-ness, they do not have the organisational fervour of the other ethnic groups in the region, renowned for its strong, complex traditional bureaucracy and leadership (Nkwi, 1987). Many Mbororo seem to distrust each other as much as they distrust the 'Natives' (a problem that Mboscuda members are quick to point out). They seem to have a great fear of gossip and spying, of other Mbororo talking about them or about their problems, and frequently accuse each other of doing so. According to workers at a local hospital, the number of Fulanis admitted due to internal scuffles and knifings far exceeded the number injured in conflicts with members of other ethnic groups.

_Pulaaku and Islam_

According to local Islamic leaders, Mbororo society in North West Province has only really been influenced by Islam during the second half of this century. When North West Province Mbororos are asked today about the main characteristics of a Mbororo, being a 'good Muslim' is almost invariably the first attribute they name, a change in the conscious articulation of Mbororo identity that, according to long term observers has only come about during the last twenty years.
Mbororo speak of the spiritual and moral support that Islam gives them on an individual level in these times of hardship. It would seem that whilst Islam has greater meaning for the Mbororo than before, it is now also a reflection of Mbororo individuality and distance, a reflection of *pulaaku*. Although arguably increasing, the influence of Islamic social doctrine upon Mbororo daily life and internal social mechanisms is still rather erratic. Most North West Province Mbororo seem to feel free to interpret the Koran in different ways, as they see fit, and there does not appear to be a set of accepted Islamic norms governing Mbororo society. There are, for example, only about ten to fifteen local Mbororo men who visit the Mosque daily in Sabga during the five times of prayer. Other men sometimes pray in their homes, as do, more rarely, the women. Islam does not seem to have the solidarity-in-obedience effect of bringing people together in prayer that it does in other Islamic societies. There are learned, religious individuals and Islamic elders who follow more rigorously the teachings and practices advocated by the Koran, but they do not seem to have much effect upon the conflicting currents running through Mbororo society. Islam does not appear to be a social force that Mbororo society is latching onto as a means of unifying their people against threats from outside, and frictions in the region do not seem to be expressed in religious terms.

North West Province Mbororo, like the Hausa traders in the towns, are a minority, isolated from other Muslims. Nearly all other people of the region are either Christian or one of a heterogeneous mixture of local beliefs. While this may make the Mbororo more outwardly-conscious of being Muslims, Islam does not have the political clout that it has in the strong, once independent Muslim states of Northern Cameroon. This may be a reason for their more relaxed approach to Islamic doctrine. It is far more politically necessary to be dogmatic in areas where power is held by those with the capacity to interpret Koranic law as they see fit, than in the North West Province where political power is held by members of the other religious groups.

**Pulaaku and Outside Politics**

The Mbororo have in the past been distanced from affairs of the Cameroon state, their little contact being the paying of cattle taxes with which they complied as necessary (Anon, 1948) in the same way as they would pay off any number of local patrons. Cattle tax aside, the Cameroon state did not need the Mbororo and they did not seem to need the state; the two coexisted side by side, the one’s identity not impinging upon the other. Current developments are, however, bringing about a meeting between state and ethnic identity, dragging the Mbororo by the horns into the political and economic turmoil in North West Province.

The North West Province Mbororo’s traditional reluctance to engage in either aggressive economic activity or in regional or national power struggles can be seen as a process of their pastoralist lifestyle and a version of *pulaaku*. Having had no Mbororo representatives of their own to speak for them on a regional or national level, they have cultivated a pragmatic approach to both state and local politics basing their support on complex if distant reciprocal relationships. It has been relatively easy for the Mbororo in the past to solve conflicts that have arisen by using their wealth and appealing to one of their local patrons. Patron-client relationships and vertical forms of problem solving were not restricted to the Mbororo although they went well with Mbororo pulaaku and distance. Many a land dispute has been solved by the Mbororo appealing to a local ‘Ta’ or ‘big man’ with an appropriate gift and similar gestures thereafter. The patron-client relationships that the wealthy
Mbororo cultivated were ones of distance and a degree, albeit asymmetric, of mutual respect. They have not needed to associate themselves directly with an outside political or social force, nor have they felt the need to have a regional or national political representative from their own people. The North West Province Mbororo’s power as such has been in the comparative wealth that they enjoyed as cattle graziers in relation to their subsistence farmer neighbours. Although they have in the past been one of the wealthier groups in the region, this wealth has been concentrated in their cattle herds and in their horses. Mbororo have no tradition for growing crops. They have been reluctant to enter into direct trading relations with others, traditionally using Hausa or Native middlemen to market their produce for them, often resulting in these middlemen retaining significant cuts for themselves.

During the recent changes in the direction of multi-party politics in Cameroon, many of the North West Province Mbororo switched allegiance from their traditional support of Biya’s ruling CPDM (Cameroon Peoples’ Democratic Movement) party to support of the Northern, Muslim politician Mohamadou Bello Boubia, then head of the UNDP (Union nationale pour le démocratie et le progrès), the third largest party, but since co-opted by the CPDM. When asked why, they answer that ‘he seems a calm man and a quiet man and he is a good Muslim.’ It could appear from this that the Mbororo in the North West Province are indeed participating actively in the new logistics of institutionalised national political struggles of the Cameroon State, allying themselves with the Muslim stronghold of the North. However, it could also be argued that in the North West Province Mbororo’s case, voting for a distant, Northern politician, with the convenient excuse that he is a Muslim, reflects in this example, more their desire not to become involved in new national politics at all. Voting for Bello Boubia represents an attempt by the Mbororo to keep a distance from the violent party political struggles in the North West Province that are concentrated around the Bamenda-based SDF’s (Social Democratic Front) opposition to the CPDM.

During the state of emergency in October 1992, a number of Mbororo compounds were attacked and burnt, large numbers of cattle are claimed to have been attacked with machetes. The Mbororo retaliated on horseback, attacking local villagers with their herding staffs. Mbororos were not permitted to enter certain market towns and had to buy their provisions through Hausa middlemen. These events may indeed have helped lead the Mbororo into a more genuine, growing, movement towards Muslim unity in North West Province, albeit as yet independent from the North.

**Internal Solutions?**

Mbororo society today seems to be having difficulty with the closely-packed conditions of largely-sedentary settlements such as Sabga, that are growing in size as population pressure makes transhumant lifestyles more difficult. Whilst there are many respected, titled Mbororo in the Mbororo leadership systems, their political structures seem more oriented to administration of cattle and horses, and the care of the Lamido and his palace, than to the solving of economic and social problems amongst Mbororo people. In contrast to other ‘traditional’ leaders in the North West Province, Mbororo leaders such as the Sabga Lamidos do not seem to have power in their present role to bridge alone the new divisions and disruptions in an ever-expanding, diversifying sedentary society that makes transhumant lifestyles more difficult. The *pulaaku* ethic gives the Mbororo a common identity as ‘making like a Fulani’. However, this does not seem in the present North West Province context to be a community identity but one of distant individuals maintaining and displaying their
distance and independence from each other. The Mbororo have no tradition for horizontal problem solving in contrast to other ethnic groups in the region. Difficult questions are avoided through politeness, modesty and reserve and the need to be seen to be ‘making like a Fulani’. Conflicts are suppressed and when they do emerge, can do so in a violent manner.

Violence as a means of conflict resolution is no new feature of Mbororo life. However, some sort of balance of violence was perhaps easier to maintain at a distance, with the nearest other Mbororo compound situated away on another hilltop, than in larger more tightly packed communities such as Sabga. The Mbororo Islamic elders represent a vocal force which at community level attempts to provide guidelines with which to maintain continuity and cohesion in the society. The first or second generation of those exposed to Arabic and the Koran, they advocate stricter adherence to Islamic law in Mbororo social life as a means of combating alcohol misuse, violence and immoral behaviour. However, differing attitudes to Islam only appear to underline the divisions within Mbororo society. Some Islamic leaders retain a dogmatic loyalty to orthodox social codes. They disagree with some members of a new western-schooled generation who through contact with the cities and young from other ethnic groups at school, have different ideas about the social consequences of Koranic interpretations. The young are keen on maintaining and rejuvenating old Mbororo traditions such as the *baralala*, a Mbororo dance, danced in former days at Muslim festivals, involving Mbororo of both sexes, young and old. This is frowned upon by North West Province Mallams and Imams.

**Changing Patron-Client Power Relations**

The fragmentation of Mbororo society and the difficulties it has in solving social conflicts from within has been catalysed by changing economic fortunes and political upheaval. This has left the Mbororo vulnerable to abuse from outside forces who are eager to create an order of their own, through force, with its base in Mbororo society. Mbororo patron-client relationships are taking new forms with the political and economic changes in Cameroon. The decline in Mbororo wealth and thus their power, coupled with openings in political space, new local political ‘patrons’, new discourses of rights, and media campaigns against ‘corrupt’ individuals, have complicated things, destroying the delicate balances of power the Mbororo previously cultivated with their distant patrons.

The Mbororo in the North West Province live under the shadow of an extremely wealthy and ambitious member of the Central Committee of the ruling party. Whilst not actually a Fulani himself, Al Hadi Baba Danpullo has a history of dealings with them, taking advantage of the divisions in Mbororo society and the remains of their declining wealth to build up his own power base (Bobga interview, 1993). The case of Baba Danpullo is interesting in three ways. First, because the mechanisms he has used to control the Mbororo are the same mechanisms that have otherwise contributed to an effective, although undeniably asymmetric, system of patron-Mbororo power and influence. Second, because Al Hadi Baba Danpullo also represents the ‘old politics’ of the present regime which are having difficulty relating to the ‘new politics’ of democracy and debate. Third, it illustrates the weakness of Islamic administrative structures in the North West Province.

Baba Danpullo bound Mbororos to him when they were in need of financial assistance or needed extracting from some local political dispute, establishing a relationship that
in other times was much a matter of course. The Mbororo in the past were self-sufficient, relatively rich and a useful economic source to tap. However, with the Mbororo losing their wealth and livelihood, moving to the towns and away from their family clans it is becoming less easy for them to repay their debts and keep check upon the going price for a favour.

With the opening of the political forum and the amazing new array of possible future ‘Pa’s’ (or ‘big men’) that it is necessary to keep on the good side of, relationships of loyalty become much more complicated – especially when the major, North West Province based opposition party vows to eradicate corruption in the country. Baba Danpullo feels threatened by the changes taking place, as does the present regime. He has turned to more extreme measures, keeping his own battalion of gendarmes in his palace fortress in the region of Kom. He attempts to take advantage of the present lack of Mbororo organisation, placing large amounts of money into cattle cooperative ventures which leading Mbororo figures are pressed to contribute towards and participate in, arranging for the imprisonment of those who stand in his way (Bobga interview, 1993).

Danpullo also attempts to maintain his order over Mbororo society by taking advantage of their religious isolation in the North West Province, and the weakness of their own Islamic structures. He has been given permission by the government to set up an Alkali Islamic court in the province, giving him overriding power over all Muslims in the region. He now has the power to bring charges against whoever he pleases, with summons signed by the chief of gendarmes, allowing him to imprison and torture the few Mbororo who stand up to him.

In the course of our enquiries, any line of questioning that we conducted as to why the Mbororo in the countryside have not made any effort to get together and respond to the many threats to their way of life have ended in silence and vague references to the ‘force from outside’, as they refer to it. In private, Mbororo express fears that their neighbours might be spies for this ‘force’ and the matter is rarely discussed openly. It is no coincidence that Baba Danpullo has chosen Mbororo people as his clients. It would seem that whilst openings in political space are providing opportunities for other Cameroonians to organise themselves, form parties and speak out, Mbororo society is set in contrast as they see forces ‘from outside’ take advantage of pulaku ethics, the weakness of links between Mbororo, the weakness of traditional mechanisms of problem solving and Islamic structures, and Mbororo economic decline, thereby manipulating relations of patronage to create their own, closed political and economic arena.

In a revealing interpretation of the discourse of ‘rights’ presently enjoying popularity in North West Province public debate, one established Mbororo when pressed as to why he did not openly resist Al Hadji Baba Danpullo replied simply: ‘I have a right to be scared’. However, according to human rights activist and lawyer to those imprisoned by Al Hadji Baba Danpullo, Mr Harmony Bobga:

*The most recent attacks on the Mbororo and the corresponding publicity that they have received as opposition media has picked up on their case might have been a blessing in disguise for the Mbororo people.*

The opposition media has been able to speak for the Mbororo in a way that they have, up to now, found it difficult to do themselves (*The Custodian*, 31 May 1993), constituting the Mbororo from the outside as ‘victims of tyranny’. They are freed from
having to plead themselves as exploited and backward (in what would be a humiliating business for a Mbororo). Pride in being Mbororo overrides any possible distaste at hearing of their people's weaknesses, as they see their case as worthy of being put into print. Everyone suddenly has heard of what is going on, even if they are not able to read the newspaper stories.

The Mbororo and 'New' Politics

Patron-client relationships have hitherto presented the most effective means for the individual Mbororo to get their demands through the system vertically, with pulakku. In the North West Province at present, however, there appear to be interlinked, yet nevertheless competing arenas for political expression, old and new, where there are 'new' state-civil society arenas of democratic struggle; political parties, the media and new social movements, seem to dominate the high ground. Patron-client relationships do not in my opinion necessarily submit to the privileged force of politics of state and civil society or of a determinate future, but continue within these new forms of political expression. However the opposition political parties and the new social movements operating within an ('imagined?') civil society can more convincingly co-opt discourses of democracy, equal expression for all, than the present guardians of the Cameroon state, arenas based on networks of elites, patronage and personal relationships, the ranks of which are closing in the face of attack from outside and dwindling State resources.

Whilst the continuity of personal relationships and that of patron-client relationships is undeniable and can indeed be found in the heart of these 'new' political arenas, the subtleties of these former systems of power and politics, now an issue of 'free speech', seem reduced in popular debates to a marginal caricature, constituted by the 'honest' protagonists of 'new' politics as blatant and open 'corruption' and lack of 'accountability'. Many of these former power relations were indeed cruel and oppressive for the 'client' party. However, political relations of former, wealthier days appear to have given the Mbororo more manoeuvrability than the 'new' political arenas. The Mbororo retain a cautious, distance from these new arenas. In the words of opposition SDF leader John Fru Ndi, himself a North Westerner:

we fight for them [the Mbororo] but they don’t support us at election time. They vote for Bello Bouba instead. We help them in their problems with corrupt members of the government! We intervene on their behalf in land disputes – our lawyers speak for Mbororo wrongfully imprisoned! – but they do not trust us! They are so adapted to corruption! They don’t understand that we can help them without them giving us bribes (interview, June 1993).

Mboscuda: a Mbororo New Social Movement

Media interest has however helped to make Mbororo in the countryside a little more open towards ways of solving their problems from the outside and to make things a little easier for a number of new generation Mbororo who are trying to build a new basis for Mbororo organisation through Mboscuda. Thus when three Mboscuda members were imprisoned and tortured by Baba Danpullo after failing to respond to jumped up charges in his private court (Ardo Duni et al. interview: May, 1993), the media outcry that followed and the interest of foreign human rights organisations provided good publicity for Mboscuda and the Mbororos in the North West Province.
Influenced by the fast moving political changes in the towns, foreign radio programmes about social movements in Nigeria and equivalent movements for minority rights in the North West Province, such as the Anglophone movement, Mboscuda is struggling to encourage communication between Mbororo peoples and discussion of the threats facing Mbororo society on a local, regional and national level (Mboscuda, 1992). Responding to the consequences of the meeting between the modernising state and the lifestyle of the Mbororo, Mboscuda hopes to act as a go-between. Its aim is to work alongside traditional Mbororo leaders, strengthen Islamic structures and provide a new forum for the discussion of specifically Mbororo problems and the future of their society and culture, organising around strengthening ideas of ‘Fulaniness’ in a multi-ethnic, democratic national political arena.

This ambitious young organisation has, however, been encountering difficulties. Many of these are due to the fact that whilst the founding members are genuinely attempting to respond to the social changes that face their society, they are themselves part and product of these same changes.

Some Mboscuda members express irritation at the ignorance and cowardice of their fathers and families in the countryside. The young, without families, without income – and therefore difficult targets for the likes of Baba Danpullo – are unsympathetic to the older generation and older Mboscuda members who have more to lose. Other Mbororo, whilst not outwardly opposing the organisation, remain to be convinced that Mboscuda is not just creating more problems with conflicting forces from outside. They are wary of the Mbororo ‘getting too political’ and coming out as losers in a new, uncertain, political arena where they are already under attack.

Members of the elder generation and the more traditional Mbororo take offence at what they perceive as the new generation’s arrogance and distinct lack of pulaaku. They respond to the brashness of some Mboscuda members by humouring them, yet keeping away from the heat of debate and discussion. When our young, educated, female and Mboscuda-member translator asked the wives of the present Lamido of Sabga what the greatest difference was between Mbororo in the old days and those today, she was told that:

In those days when we were your age we followed the cows all day and then when we didn’t have any duties we spent time relaxing with our sisters. We didn’t go to school and we had more time to relax than you seem to today. We knew what a good Mbororo was and what our traditions were and what Islam meant to us … These days you young people spend all your time running up and down asking people what it means to be an Mbororo because you’ve forgotten yourselves what it means!

The gender conflicts that are beginning to emerge with changes in Mbororo society are also reflected in Mboscuda. Amina Hamman, Mboscuda’s treasurer, is 33 years old and from the first North West Province Mbororo family that sent its daughters to school:

I was the first woman in the organisation and at our first meetings I was the only woman among many men. According to our tradition I was not supposed to be there at all. If our elders were there it could cause problems. We are trying to break down these traditions and there are more women in Mboscuda now. It is difficult to understand though how Mboscuda members can say that they want more women in Mboscuda and want women to talk at meetings when they leave their own women at home … they won’t even allow their own wives to come.
Islamic leaders are also attempting to exert their influence within Mboscuda by, for example, trying to get the organisation to ban dancing. The youth of the organisation have reacted in a way that reflects the street forms of democratic protest presently used by other Cameroonian peoples. At a recent provincial meeting, the young ‘danced in resistance’ whilst religious prayers were taking place. According to Mboscuda participants, every time the elders succeeded in quelling the Mbororo drums in one area, they would start up in another. On an official level, however, the organisation does not dare to conflict with religious authorities in controversial areas. This means many of their policies, such as family planning, have to be done in an underhand, secret way.

The case of Mboscuda resistance to Al Hadji Baba Danpullo illustrates clearly the pluralist/exclusivist ambiguities of Mbororo ethnic discourse. On the official level Mboscuda resistance to Baba Danpullo is part of a pluralistic, democratic, struggle against corrupt oppressors, involving horizontal links with other, similar social movements such as human rights organisations. However, more popular ‘everyday resistance’ (Scott, 1989) to Al Hadji Baba amongst the less ‘courageous’ Mboscuda members is expressed more in racial terms, as they scornfully write him off as ‘no real Mbororo’, and ‘descended from haabe’. One of the main charges brought against the Mboscuda members detained at his Alkali court was that they had been overheard accusing him of being descended from a ‘slave’.

Baba’s father, it is said, was a Fulbe while his mother was apparently a ‘Native’, from Kom in the North West Province. The name ‘Baba Danpullo’ reflects his family’s desire to associate themselves with the Fulani, pullo being the root form of the Fulfulde word for ‘Fulani’. The emphasis that both Baba Danpullo and some Mbororo thus seem to put upon racial legitimacy in the fight against Baba Danpullo suggests the continuity of chauvinist sentiments found in pulaaku concepts of ‘purity’, that are not easily dismissed.

In trying to become an organised expression of ‘Mbororoness’, Mboscuda has also to take on board the sometimes conflicting ambiguities that the idea of ‘making like a Fulani’ encompasses. There is no one core to Mbororo identity and individual Mbororo will see Mbororoness in very different ways. In trying to draw together fragmented groups of Mbororo with failing personal pride and belief in their own worth, some members of Mboscuda will appeal to common feelings of Mbororo racial superiority, glorifying the physical attributes of a people who would never marry a member of the other, ‘Native’, groups and whose traditional society was based upon a cultural resistance to a hostile world outside. Whilst trying to restore pride in ethnic identity, these sentiments could develop chauvinist overtones.

It is interesting to note that this Mbororo organisation, now a social movement on a national level with representatives in all provinces where there are Mbororo, decided after much heated discussion to change its name from what was previously called – a ‘Fulani’ social and cultural organisation, to a purely Mbororo one. Mboscuda members place great stress on the specific problems that Mbororo have as pastoralists, thereby cutting out the risk of Fulbe dominance and distancing themselves from processes of ‘Fulbeisation’. It is faintly paradoxical that many of the founding members of Mboscuda could indeed be seen as ‘town Fulani’ of sorts; they live in the towns and do not own cattle themselves. The significance of cattle is, however, a central element in all their discussions and one of the organisation’s main raison d’être, as they take great pains to underline.
Conclusion

The situation at present in Cameroon is a fragile one, made more volatile by the stand taken by the present regime. Biya’s government has allowed for an opening in political space, the creation of new political arenas – freedoms of association, speech and discussion of conflicts in society. The Cameroon state and the power systems of the present regime are now, however, under attack. Government seems unable to accommodate, and remains largely unresponsive to, the new, articulated demands and conflicts that are being expressed.

The members of Mboscuda are trying to maintain stability and continuity in their society by organising themselves around the defence and development of their people as Cameroon citizens in a new political arena where the prevailing ideology is one of democratic pluralism. The organisation is attempting to tackle the economic and social problems facing Mbororo people as land pressure and national economic crisis spell the demise of both their pastoralist lifestyle, power and influence, and indeed the whole basis for Mbororo society’s past identity. In doing this they have the difficult task of maintaining order and creating a new forum for dialogue and discussion of the many frustrations their people are facing, creating new definitions for ‘to make like Fulani’ – bridging generation gaps and gender divisions. In choosing to base their organisation around the ambiguities of ethnic identity, they are well aware of the balancing act that they are playing.

Mboscuda cannot, on the one hand, alienate its own people by allying itself with political forces outside and becoming too involved in a new, mistrusted, political arena. On the other hand, it must try to prevent their people becoming alienated from new and changing centres of power and influence in Cameroon society. They have to take care that tensions in Mbororo society are not translated into defensive exclusivity, bitterness towards other groups or towards the outside world. The remaining question for the Mboscuda is whether the Mbororo ‘imagined community’, the ambiguities of pulaku, Fulani otherness, distance and individuality, can be transformed and channelled into a new social movement for Mbororo togetherness, that at the same time holds the door open to concepts of plurality and democracy in a national Cameroonian context. To echo the arguments of Martin Doornbos (1991:64), the border region between a ‘liberating’ organisation for the restoration of pride and the discussion of rights of a threatened, demoralised, pastoral people, and a new focus for defensive ethnic ‘chauvinism’ is similarly ambiguous.

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