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Babila Mutia

## Performer, Audience, and Performance Context of Bakweri Pregnancy Rituals and Incantations\*

The Bakweri are a homogenous ethnic group of semi-Bantu stock who inhabit the South-western region of Cameroon at the foot of the Fako or Cameroon Mountain, approximately between latitudes 4° and 7° of the Equator and 8° and 11° of the Greenwich meridian. They are part of the more than 230 ethnic groups that make up the modern state of Cameroon in Central Africa. With a total population of just over 35,000, the Bakweri occupy about 85 villages in Fako division. The Bakweri are made up of three major clans: the Kpes, the Isuwas, and the Woveas, divided into two main groups, namely *Vakpe va Lelu* (Upper Bakweri) and *Vakpe wa Mbenge*

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(Lower Bakweri). The Upper Bakweri are closer to the base of the Cameroon Mountain stretching from Mafanja in the West and to Ekona in the East. The Lower Bakweri inhabit the area along the Atlantic coast and include the villages of Ewota, Kie, Bimbia, Batoke, Bakingili, Bomboko, and Sanje (in the West Coast), Bonjongo, and Mokunda<sup>1</sup>.

Among the Bakweri, the natural and supernatural worlds interact constantly in all aspects of life. In this regard, they have a three-dimensional view of the cosmos in which the supernatural world, the world of the ancestors, and the world of the living are in frequent interaction. Bakweri ancestors, *velimo*, act as mediators between the living and *Maek'a Lowhe*, the High God. They are contacted through divinations, during libations, in dreams, visions, and during quiet moments of meditation. Clan, village, and family ancestors are consulted differently depending on the circumstances. While clan ancestors are invoked during epidemics, famine, war, or the eruption of the Fako Mountain, village ancestors are invoked when there is a high mortality rate, sickness, and poor harvest. Family ancestors are consulted during births, deaths, marriages, successes, and family meetings.

## Pregnancy Rituals and Incantations

It will, perhaps, be useful to identify definitions of "ritual" which will be appropriate in the discussion of the pregnancy rituals in this article.

According to Evan Zeusse (1979: 7), African religious rituals involve the "sanctification of everyday life" and embody the three spheres of human life that must but integrated together—"the personal egoistic sphere, the social sphere, and the transcendental cosmic sphere". In this sense:

"Ritual is the vehicle by which religions of structure achieve ... [the] integration [and] transformation of one's perception of an ordinary object or person from a literal, personal, or social mode to a symbolic and transcendental one" (Johnson 1982: 8).

Perhaps the definition that comes closest to reflecting the rituals discussed in this article is this one offered by Evan Zeusse (1983: 406) in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*. It views ritual as:

"[...] intentional body engagement in the paradigmatic forms and relationships of reality. As such, ritual brings not only the body but also that body's social and cultural identity to the encounter with the transcendental realm. By conforming to models or paradigms that refer to the primordial past and that can be shared by many people, ritual also enables each person to transcend the individual self, and thus it can link many people together into enduring and true forms of community. As a result, ritual draws into itself every aspect of human life..."

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1. See Ngoto Hannah ETONDE (1994: 8-9).

In this regard, life among the Bakweri is meaningless if ancestral power and presence are absent. The people believe that their ancestors can bless and assist them in times of difficulties and can also punish vices in the community. It is for this reason that the Bakweri *nganga* or traditional doctors perform pregnancy rituals and incantations (as part of Bakweri traditional religious and social obligations) to supplicate the ancestors to guide and protect the expectant mother during her gestation and to protect the baby when it is born.

Bakweri pregnancy rituals and their accompanying incantations are thus performed to avert abortions, premature deliveries, stillbirths, and to ensure safe delivery. Hence, they are intended to keep the pregnant woman healthy throughout her gestation period. Four main kinds of pregnancy rituals can be distinguished among the Bakweri. They are the *lilale* (smashing) ritual, the *mesuma na mavengo* (bending) ritual, *mɔndo* (ring or bangle) ritual, and the *isasa* (chain) ritual. These four rituals are performed by four separate *nganga* (traditional doctors). The implication here is that the pregnant woman moves from one herbalist to the other as her pregnancy progresses and need for each ritual arises.

## Lilale

The *lilale* or “smashing” ritual is performed on a woman when she is about three months pregnant. The chief celebrant for this ritual is the *nganga* who executes the ritual to prevent miscarriages and premature deliveries. Among the Bakweri, it is believed that if a woman is bewitched, accidentally touches some potent herbs when she goes to the farm, or if she shakes hands with a medicine man or traditional healer, she will have a miscarriage.

The *lilale* ritual takes place in the *nganga*’s kitchen near the fireplace; in the case where the *nganga* has no kitchen, the ritual is performed in a section of his main house where cooking takes place. The main house is usually a rectangular structure made up of rough planks the Bakweri call “carraboards” with two main doors, one leading into the house from the front part and the other leading out into the backyard or kitchen. In some cases, the main house has two bedrooms and a sitting room. In others, there is just one long rectangular room with a few items of furniture by the hearth at one end and a bed at the other end.

Where there is a kitchen, it would have a fireplace or hearth with a firewood shelf over it where wood is dried. The kitchen would also contain a flat rectangular plank called *ewongó* placed on two big logs of wood beside the fireplace. The plank serves as a sitting place for people who bask themselves by the fire, tell stories, or cook food. It equally serves as a bed. In some large kitchens there could be two or three of these *ewongó*. There are also about two or three wooden stools in the kitchen.



- na mène Likòwo la Mòtiè*  
 I saw Likowo Motie  
*nene Nwambo nwi Ikule*  
 I saw Mwambo Ikule  
*Enògbwèane*  
 Help me cure this woman  
*o lalisewe yamono*  
 You have been smashed today  
*molana n'enyò n'elivaliva*  
 Woman, anything you do should be smooth  
*o wakise yawono*  
 You have been protected today  
*o watewe ndi nganga*  
 Even if you shake hands with a herbalist  
*lùnga lisa tumeya*  
 You will not have a miscarriage  
*lùnga lisa soka*  
 You will not be sick in your belly  
*o lembe wèwulé*  
 If you touch potent leaves in the farm  
*lùnga lisa nyima*  
 [chanting]  
 You will not bleed  
*owùse ène okweyà efefe*  
 Leave this woman's body, go to another  
*okwo lio*  
*okwo lio*  
 Audience: *kwiti na kwiti waweli o (2x)*  
 Strong, strong, the woman and baby have been made strong (2x)  
 Herbalist: [chanting]  
*okwo lio*  
*okwo lio*  
 Audience: *oti*  
*oti*  
 Woman: *woli wango wo yowo wono*  
 This is payment for your medicine  
 Herbalist: *nuwani woli*  
 I have got wealth

In this first incantation, the *nganga* calls on his ancestors to protect the woman and the baby in her womb. He also calls on the dead *nganga* who initiated or trained him and those of his ancestral line to help him in the process of protecting the woman. Because the Bakweri believe that not every member of the community is happy when a woman is pregnant, most illnesses that afflict pregnant women are attributed to witchcraft and jealousy. This is why the *nganga* pleads with his ancestors to protect the pregnant woman from the wrath of wicked men. This is highlighted in the section of the incantation in which the *nganga* chants: “... *gbwàngu wo kàmbi liawo/òngise mwàna nyuwe a taka lindo*” which means both the pregnant woman and her baby have been protected, that is why they have become as strong as the hard wood called “*gbangu*”, which is difficult to

split. As the *nganga* utters these words, he uses vivid gestures, smiles, and nods of approval as if he can see his ancestors and predecessors who have come to prepare the medicine with him. He dramatises his monologue in order to pass his message across to his audience who are supposed to actively participate in the ritual. As he chants, the *nganga* sways in a slow kind of dance following the rhythm of the incantation.

After the incantation, the *nganga* ties some of the *wosongi* (enema) herbs in a small bundle. He helps the pregnant woman stand up from the wooden chair by holding her two hands and then passes the *wosongi* nine times round the woman's belly. He uses his left hand first to pass the *wosongi* from her spinal cord to her navel before he passes the enema to his right hand and passes it again around the spinal cord area, in a clockwise direction. Next, he uses his right big toe to "smash" the woman on her navel. Some *nganga* use their right big toe to step on the woman's right big toe. Finally the *nganga* wraps the *wosongi* in a *ngonyi* leaf with one side exposed and hands it to the woman.

The principal audience in the *lilale* and other three rituals consists mainly of the pregnant woman's mother, and the *nganga*'s young apprentice/son. The pregnant woman's mother is part of the audience that assures the success of the performance in the ritual. She answers the choruses, claps her hands, smiles, grimaces, and helps her daughter to prepare the *wosongi*. The *nganga*'s young apprentice/son also answers the choruses, smiles and frowns when he is sent too often by his father, and claps his hands in rhythm as his father chants the incantation.

While the pregnant woman's mother and the *nganga*'s son can be regarded as the more passive audience in these performances, the pregnant woman on whom the ritual is performed could, in more relative terms, be considered the more active and essential part of the audience who participates actively in the course of the performance. However, while the *nganga* is generally considered as the chief celebrant of these ritual performances, the pregnant woman on whom the rituals are performed could also be regarded as a complementary co-participant (if not a co-performer) whose dynamic involvement in the rituals enhances and completes the performances. It is in this sense that the pregnant woman participates in these performances through her actions, smiles, claps, and limited utterances. She is, for example, made to sit down and stand up as the leaves are rubbed on her body. She collects the *wosongi* from the *nganga* and pays him money which she places in her head scarf before handing it to him. In this sense then, the pregnant woman on whom these rituals are performed can be thought of, simultaneously, as both audience and co-celebrant of the rituals; for without her the rituals would neither take place nor be made manifest.

After paying the *nganga* the pregnant woman is supposed to take the enema. If she has to take it in the *nganga*'s house, her mother puts water in the clay pot. The pregnant woman loosens the knot of the rope that was used to tie the *wosongi* and puts it in the pot; later on, she or her



mother puts the pot on the fire which is not supposed to be fanned and hot coals allowed to be removed from it. It is believed that if the fire is touched the medicine in the clay pot will lose its potency. The *wosongi* is allowed to boil over the clay pot for about twenty minutes; if it does not boil over, it is regarded as a bad omen and the pregnant woman will have to repeat the ritual in another session. Sometimes, if the *wosongi* does not boil over, a *mota lianga* (diviner) has to be consulted.

When the *wosongi* is removed from the fire, the pregnant woman has to throw cold water on one of the three stones on the hearth before it is used again. As the *wosongi* is allowed to cool down, the pregnant woman adds *manyanga* (black palm-kernel oil) and *igweya* (camwood powder) to it. After taking the enema, the woman is not supposed to use toilet paper; instead, she uses the three pieces of sticks called *mbesa* to clean herself. She throws the first stick behind her, the second in front of her, and the third behind her. It is believed that the third and first sticks the pregnant woman throws behind her prevent misfortune from befalling her during the pregnancy. The pregnant woman has the option to take the chaff of the *wosongi* home or leave it in the *nganga's* house.

If she opts to take the *wosongi* home she will preserve it on the firewood shelf in her kitchen, in this case the pregnant woman does not shake hands or talk to anybody along the way until she enters her house. Whether the enema is taken in her home or at the *nganga's* house, the method of taking it remains the same. As the pregnant woman walks back home, she puts a piece of plantain leaf across her mouth to indicate to any person she meets along the way that no one should talk to her, allowing only her mother to talk and greet people.

When she feels any acute abdominal pain as the pregnancy progresses, the woman brings down the *wosongi* from the firewood shelf, pours warm water on it, and takes another enema. This eases the pain and protects the woman from other illnesses and evils throughout her pregnancy. This ritual is performed on a woman during all her pregnancies.

### Mesuma na mavèngo

The second pregnancy ritual, the *mesuma na mavèngo* (or “stopping”) ritual is performed when a woman is five months pregnant to protect her from witchcraft and jealousy. The context of performance for the *mesuma na mavèngo* ritual is the same like the *lilale* ritual which takes place in the *nganga's* house. The requirements for this ritual are: *ephoa mboli esa tana* (a non-white goat that was born alone), *moma wúwa* (a cock), *wúwa nwali* (a hen), *livanya* (a clay pot), *nweò* (an egg), *manyanga* (black palm-kernel oil), *mokoko mo njika* (red sugar cane), *esanja* (loincloth), and various herbs collected by the *nganga* from the bush. During the performance of the ritual the *nganga* also has to prepare a whitish substance called *ngweli*,

for the pregnant woman. Usually, the *nganga* provides the requirements for the *ngweli* which are: *lûunu* (dried yam), *ekênju* (traditional beans), *ikpa* (salt), and *wendoko we ndengelenge* (cayenne pepper).

The *mesuma na mavèngo* ritual is performed early in the morning and the audience in the ritual is made up of the pregnant woman, her mother, the *nganga*'s apprentice/son, and other members of the *nganga*'s family who may be present when the ritual is performed. The audience participates actively in the ritual by carrying out instructions from the *nganga* and by answering the choruses in the incantation that accompanies the ritual, clapping their hands in rhythm with the songs in the incantation, talking, and laughing in the course of the performance.

The *nganga* places a *ngonyi* leaf on a wooden stool and helps the pregnant woman sit on it. Next he sits on the *ewongó* or on another wooden stool in front of the woman and then begins the incantation as he spits on the herbs in his hands:

Herbalist: [spitting on the herbs]  
*oweya wewule, ojeli yowo*  
 You were leaves, you are now medicine  
*wa tate enogbwèyane*  
 Our ancestors, help me cure this woman  
*ama as mosàmbeli*  
 She says she wants a spokesperson  
*a tise litu la mesuma na mevèngo*  
 I have cooked a pot of mesuma na mavèngo  
*litu la njanja mavèngo*  
 A pot of njanja mavèngo medicine  
*moyàeli ewòma linỳè*  
 A pregnant woman should be as strong as a rock.  
*a ma mesuma*  
 He says to bend  
*me mɔ̀ndo mwe ekwokwo*  
 Strong like rings worn on fingers  
*me yakaka nwa*  
 Strong like the handle of a hoe  
*me ngòwu ja meseseni*  
 Strong like the cane used in weaving baskets  
*me ngòwu ja makoko*  
 Strong like canes for tying bands  
*me jumbumba ja gwènde*  
 When the moon appears  
*e gwènde o maundeli*  
 In the middle of the month  
*e gwènde o lisuku*  
 In the end of the month  
*owuse ène okweya efêfê*  
 Leave this woman's body, go to another  
*a lani' iko, a lani ngomba*  
 You have eaten snails and ngomba  
*a sumbameya*  
 You should not be blocked

*a saitele*  
 You should not push with force  
*a sa nya fulù*  
 You should not excrete foams  
*a watewe ndi nganga*  
 Even if you shake hands with a herbalist  
*lùnga lisa tumeya*  
 You will not have a miscarriage  
*lùnga lisa soka*  
 Your belly shall not pain  
*lùnga lisa nyinga*  
 Your pregnancy shall not shake  
*a ènde ndo wanga*  
 Even if you go to the farm  
*a lembe wewùle*  
 And touch potent herbs  
*tatuwe, nyama, liembù, itambi*  
*tatuwe, nyama, liembù, itambi*  
*lùnga lisa tumeya*  
 You will not have a miscarriage  
*lùnga lisa soka*  
 Your belly shall not pain  
*a lala ndi songo ya moto*  
 Even if you step on somebody's grave  
*lùnga lisa tumeya*  
 You will not have a miscarriage  
*lùnga lisa soka*  
 Your belly shall not pain  
*o gbwa ndi mwoanga mo likawo*  
 Even if you break a coconut  
*nwenge mo so fa mbombo*  
 Your baby shall not have a depressed forehead  
*a la ndi kawè*  
 Even if she eats antelope  
*a la ndi ngweya*  
 Even if she eats ngweya  
*mòyǎelí a sa nànga soom*  
 A pregnant woman does not sleep deeply  
*a sa nanga fokosà fokosà*  
 She does not sleep carelessly  
*a soto fako*  
 She does not dream about the mountain  
*a soto mwanja*  
 She does not dream about the sea  
*a e wakise yàwonò*  
 She has completed her medicine today  
*o wùse ène o kweyà efêfê*  
 Leave this woman's body, go to another  
 [chanting]  
*meyanganya*  
*meyanganya*

As the *nganga* performs the incantation he spits on the leaves at intervals and hits the leaves on the woman's head, back, and belly. After the first

part of the incantation, the *nganga* stands up and beckons his apprentice to hand him the fowls. He takes them with both hands and swings them over the woman's head and starts chanting the second part of the incantation:

- Audience:        *nya*  
                          *nya*  
 Herbalist:        *mesingoane, mesasingoane*  
                          Wiping, it is difficult to wipe  
                          *mesingoane, mesasingoane*  
                          Wiping, it is difficult to wipe  
 Audience:        *mesingoane, mesasingoane*  
                          *mesasingoane*  
                          Wiping, it is difficult to wipe,  
                          Wiping  
 Herbalist:        *mbetetu a suma nganga,*  
                          *kuku o lowa*  
                          The stars have stooped before the herbalist,  
                          up in the sky  
 Audience:        *Mbetetu*  
                          Stars in the sky  
 Herbalist:        *na womeya le meyondo me senya*  
                          I am hitting the woman to make her strong  
 Audience:        *na womeya le*  
                          I am hitting  
 Herbalist:        [chanting]  
                          *meyanganya*  
                          *meyanganya*  
 Audience:        *nya*  
                          *nya*

After completing the chant, the *nganga*, with the help of his apprentice, places the goat on the woman's knees. After a few moments, he takes the goat away from the woman's knees, places it on the ground, and gives the woman a sharp knife or cutlass with which she is supposed to cut off the goat's head. If she cannot, she pretends as if she is about to kill the goat. The *nganga* takes the knife from her hand and slaughters the goat.

The *nganga* puts the herbs in the clay pot, adds water to them, and drops some of the blood from the slaughtered goat into the pot, before he breaks the egg and adds it to the mixture. The goat which is slaughtered during the ritual is used to appease the ancestors and gods for them to protect the pregnant woman. The *nganga* finally adds pieces of the sugarcane into the clay pot before the pregnant woman and himself hold the pot and place it on the fire. As the medicine in the clay pot is brought to boil, the woman puts some money in her headscarf and hands it to the herbalist.

Next, the *nganga* assigns his son to bring the ritual items for preparing the *ngweli* from a basket by the fireside. These items are placed on a grinding stone on which the *nganga* and the woman both begin to grind the ingredients. After about a minute, the *nganga* calls the boy to complete grinding the ingredients. When the *ngweli* is ready, the *nganga* instructs

the woman to open her hands, the right palm facing upwards and the left facing downwards. The *nganga* then carries the *ngweli* with the tip of his fingers and puts some of it on the pregnant woman's right palm and on the back of her left hand. As the woman chews the *ngweli*, she swallows some and spits the rest on her palms which she rubs on her belly. When the medicine that was cooking on the fire is ready, the woman uses it to take an enema; thereafter she uses three, five, or seven *mbesa* sticks to clean herself as she did in the first ritual.

The *nganga* uses the dried barks of a plantain stem to tie the clay pot which contains the medicine. It is this clay pot that the pregnant woman takes home and puts it in a corner of her firewood shelf. If her house has no firewood shelf, she puts the clay pot under her bed. She is not expected to carry out this ritual again in her lifetime except if her baby dies. This is why everything is done by the Bakweri to prevent infant mortality, especially the death of a first child.

## Mondo

The *mondo* (bangle or ring) ritual is performed in two phases. In the first instance, it is performed on a woman when she is about seven months pregnant to prevent contractions and associated pains around her pelvic region. The requirements for this ritual are: *ngondá mboli* (a young female goat), *ngwá ya momé* (male dog), *yokwo ya mboli* (a Billy goat), *moma wuwa* (a cock), *nwali ya woma* (a hen), *nweyo* (an egg), *meko* (plantains), *ndàa* (cocoyams), *motimbo* (walking stick), *njambi* (a cutlass), *esanjà* (a loin-cloth), *livanya* (a clay pot), *esunga mosai* (a carrier basket), *maliwa* (water), *yakaka nwa* (the handle of a hoe), *mimba* (palm-wine), *luunu* (dried yam), *wendoko we ndengelenge* (cayenne pepper), *ikwa* (salt), and an assortment of herbs provided by the *nganga*. The setting for the *mondo* ritual is the same as in the first two rituals. The *nganga*'s and the pregnant woman's attire remain the same. The audience in this ritual which is larger than all the rituals is made up of the members of the *nganga*'s family, the pregnant woman's mother, and all passers-by. The significance of this ritual is to make the woman bold and courageous to experience the process of childbirth.

The *nganga* starts the first part of the ritual by spitting on the herbs and uttering the opening words of the incantation. He then calls on his ancestors and predecessors to help him protect the pregnant woman:

Herbalist:           [spitting on the herbs]  
                   *namenε Kinga Molonge*  
                   I saw Chief Molonge  
                   *nεnε Mokeenge mo Njoke*  
                   I saw Mokeenge Njoke  
                   *nεnε Ngale Esemba*  
                   I saw Ngale Esemba

- Mokenge mo Mafani*  
 Mokenge mo Mafani  
*Njoke Lieti*  
 Njoke Lieti  
*Mani ma Njange*  
 Mani ma Njange  
*welimo na ma kowa li kowa*  
 My ancestors, I learnt this art  
*na se mbeneya*  
 I did not imitate it  
*wa tate enogbwèyane*  
 My ancestors, help me cure this woman  
 [spitting on the herbs]  
*owèya wewùle o timbi yowo*  
 You were leaves, now you are medicine  
*owùse ene ekwèya efêfê*  
 Leave this woman's body, go to another  
*osa nwa ikòwe*  
 Do not think about her anymore  
*a lèmbi e mome, a lèmbi etina*  
 She has caught the male, she has caught the female  
*molana n'enyò, n'elivaliva*  
 Woman, you should have a safe delivery  
 [chanting] *meyanga nya*  
 [chanting] Meyanga nya  
 Audience: *nya*  
 Nya  
 Herbalist: *koki 'inoni é*  
 Koki 'inoni é  
*a sàngàlènnè malé ma likomba*  
 Has embraced the malé in the forest  
*koki 'inoni é*  
 Koki 'inoni é  
 Audience: *a sàngàlènnè malé ma likomba*  
 Has embraced the malé in the forest  
*koki 'inoni é*  
 Koki 'inoni  
 Herbalist: *Okwo lio*  
 Okwo lio  
 Audience: *Oti*  
 Oti  
 Herbalist: *kwiti na kwiti wa weli o o (2x)*  
 Kwiti na kwiti they are there o o (2x)  
 Audience: *kwiti na kwiti wa weli o o (2x)*  
 Kwiti na kwiti they are there o o (2x)  
 Herbalist: *gbwàngu é gbwàngu (3x)*  
 Gbwàngu é gbwàngu (3x)  
 Audience: *gbwàngu é gbwàngu (3x)*  
 gbwàngu é gbwàngu (3x)  
 Herbalist: *menyanga nya*  
 menyanga nya  
 Audience: *nya*  
 nya

While performing the incantation, the *nganga* hits the leaves on the woman's body beginning from her feet and moving up to her head. From time to time, he dips the leaves in the clay pot containing water as he continues hitting the herbs on her body. As the incantation continues, he takes the egg and rubs it on her feet, belly, breasts, left and right ears, and on her head. He also rubs the cock, hen, dog, and the goat all over the woman's body. Each time the *nganga* finishes rubbing the woman with an item, he spits to his left and then to his right.

After the performance of the incantation, the *nganga* leads the woman into a nearby bush behind his kitchen. Other members of the audience witnessing the ritual remain in the kitchen. The *nganga*'s apprentice/son brings along a wooden stool on which the *nganga* puts a *ngonyi* leaf. The *nganga* helps the woman sit down on the stool as the boy brings forward the cock, male goat, and the clay pot in which the herbs were put. The *nganga* hands a cutlass to the woman and holds down the goat and the cock in front of her on a plantain leaf. He says part of the "*mesasingône, mesasingône?*" (she is cleansed, is she not cleansed?) incantation; and as he does so, the pregnant woman is supposed to cut off the heads of the cock and goat. If she cannot, she is helped by the *nganga* and his son. After this, the *nganga* helps the woman stand up by holding her hand, then strips her naked by taking off her loincloth. The *nganga* gives her the walking stick and sings, *molana a sa tumi mosombo é* (has the woman not stripped herself naked?) and the woman answers, *a tumi é* (she has stripped herself naked). The *nganga* puts the carrier basket on the woman and allows her to balance it on her back and waist before he shreds it with a knife, allowing it to fall on the ground. After this, the *nganga* leads the naked woman back to the kitchen where the waiting audience of men and women gather by the entrance of the kitchen and "shame" her by ululating, *wú, wù, wù, é é é*. The *nganga* again chants the "*mesasingône, mesasingône*" incantation and the audience responds, "*mesasingône é*" (she is cleansed) and claps at the same time. The woman begins to dance as she moves towards the kitchen where her mother gives her a loincloth to tie over her breasts<sup>2</sup>.

When they get back to the kitchen, the *nganga* prepares a *litu* (which is made up of the herbs he used to rub the woman, the drops of blood from the slaughtered male goat and cock, some fur from the dog, feathers from the hen and fur from the male goat). The *nganga* now puts the bangle or ring (as the case may be) in the pot which he and the woman hold and hit on one of the fire-stones three times before they place it on the fire. The pot is covered with a *ngonyi* leaf and allowed to boil for about twenty

2. The significance of the pregnant woman's nakedness is in the attempt of making her bold and shameless. After this ritual, she is expected to come to terms with her own body as woman and be prepared to deliver anywhere, even in the market place, without feeling ashamed. After the ritual, the hen, the dog, and the female goat become the property of the *nganga* as they are released in his yard.

minutes until it boils over. When the *litu* is ready, the woman takes an enema with it like she did in the other rituals. The *nganga* wraps the clay pot with the bark of a plantain stem and stores it on the firewood shelf in his kitchen. The *nganga* also gives the pregnant woman *ngweli*. Meanwhile, the *nganga*'s wife or wives, the pregnant woman, and the other female members of the audience cook the slaughtered goat with cocoyams and plantains. The cooked food and palm-wine are used to entertain everybody who is present in the performance of the ritual. This general entertainment ends the first phase of the *mɔndo* ritual.

The second phase of this ritual is called the *luuwa* or nine days. It is performed on either the third, fifth, seventh, or ninth day (never on an odd day) after the first phase of the *mɔndo* ritual. The setting and costumes remain the same. The *nganga* burns black the beak of the cock and the snout of the male goat that were slaughtered in the first phase of the ritual. After they are burnt black, the *nganga* grinds them into a fine powder. He takes the clay pot containing the medicine he had kept in the first part of the ritual from the firewood shelf and pours water into it. He uses some of the water to mix the black powder into a smooth paste. He then removes the bangle or ring from the clay pot and rubs it in the black mixture. He now goes ahead and throws the bangle or ring on the ground and pretends it is lost. Next he takes a glowing piece of wood from the fireplace and uses it as a torch to look for the bangle, as he asks, "*iwólo, iwólo, iwólo*" (where is it, where is it, where is it?). By the time he asks for it the third time, the pregnant woman answers, "*jiini*" ("here it is" or "I have seen it"). The *nganga* picks up the bangle and puts it on the woman's left wrist. If it is a ring, he puts it on her ring finger, then dips his right thumb into the black paste and rubs it on the woman's feet, knees, navel, breast, and forehead. He gives the woman the handle of the hoe to carry as if it were a baby. This symbolic handing of "the baby" by the *nganga* to the pregnant woman ends the ritual, and the woman pays the *nganga* in the usual way. The woman is not expected to repeat this ritual during subsequent pregnancies.

The woman now returns to her house with the clay pot containing the medicine and the handle of the hoe. She puts the clay pot on her firewood shelf and keeps the handle of the hoe under her bed. She only has to pour warm water in the clay pot and use it for an enema. If the ring or bangle gets lost, the *nganga* uses a cock and her old clay pot to prepare or re-make a new one.

## Isasa

The *isasa* or chain ritual is the last of the four rituals that are performed on Bakweri pregnant women. This ritual is intended to prevent a variety



of pregnancy-related illnesses that may afflict the woman during her pregnancy. It also helps to prevent the baby from taking a bridged position in the womb and ensures safe delivery. The *isasa* ritual is performed in two phases; in the first phase, the *nganga* rubs the assortment of herbs on the pregnant woman and chants the incantation at the same time. He then prepares the *litu* (medicine for her enema) and *ngweli*. In the second phase or *luuwa*, he prepares an *itoto* (a special meal containing all the fish and animal meat the woman and her mother bring along for the ritual). The *nganga* also makes a string of beads called *isasa ja mokasa* which is worn by the woman around her hips till her baby is born.

The material for this first phase of the *isasa* ritual includes most of the things required for the other rituals. The only addition to the list is the *wengu* (beads) and *mosinga nwindu*, also called *toti*. This is a black thread or a special rope from a particular plant that is only known by the *nganga*. Material for the *luuwa* phase of the ritual include: *moko n'ewange* (one plantain), *nda* (cocoyam), *wosango* (huckleberry), *njanga* (crayfish), *nyama domé* (shark fish), *moavali* (snake fish), *nyama lumbi* (a bony fish locally called 'bonga fish'), *nyama kawé* (antelope meat), *foo* (rat mole meat), *mauja* (unbleached red palm-oil), *joli ja litu* (firewood), *moanga mw'etongo* (palm-kernel), and *makoko* (elephant grass stalk). The organisation, setting, and costumes for the ritual are the same as in the first three rituals and the audience in the ritual is the same as the audience in the *mondo* ritual.

The *nganga*, first of all, pours water into the clay pot in which he has already put an assortment of herbs, and then places the clay pot on a plantain leaf in front of the pregnant woman. He spits on the leaves a couple of times as he starts the incantation:

Herbalist:           [spitting on the leaves]  
*namane wa mbambe*  
 I saw my ancestors  
*Longòso wa Wesenge*  
*Longòso wa Wesenge*  
*Moànga nwe Etongo*  
*Moànga nwe Etongo*  
*Wojomba wo Ndùmbe*  
*Wojomba wo Ndùmbe*  
*Nwendi mo Wana*  
*Nwendi mo Wana*  
*Lisoku wo Salie*  
*Lisoku wo Salie*  
*Njenja Mangòngi*  
*Njenja Mangòngi*  
*Eme Joli Towo*  
*Eme Joli Towo*  
*Njuma Motutu*  
*Njuma Motutu*  
*Liànga Motutu*  
*Liànga Motutu*

- Ekòmbe Efofo*  
 Ekòmbe Efofo  
*Ikome Moki*  
 Ikome Moki  
*Ndiva Moki*  
 Ndiva Moki  
*wagbweya yowo ya liali*  
 It is you doing this delivery medicine  
*Enogbwène*  
 So help me  
*na wakise yawòno*  
 I have protected you today  
*owùse ene, okweya efêfê*  
 Leave this woman's body, go to another  
 [chanting] *okwo lio*  
 [chanting] *okwo lio*  
 Audience: *Oti*  
 Oti  
 Herbalist: *isasa manyina misa*  
 The isasa medicine has been done  
*Isasa manyina*  
 Isasa manyina  
 Audience: *isasa manyina misa*  
 The isasa medicine has been done  
*Isasa manyina*  
 Isasa manyina  
 Herbalist: *gbwàngu se wo kambi liawo (2x)*  
 Gbwàngu wood is difficult to split (2x)  
*gbwàngu è*  
 gbwàngu è  
 Audience: *gbwàngu se wo kambi liawo*  
 gbwàngu wood is difficult to split  
 Herbalist: *yami nuwàni o walongi é*  
 I brought this medicine from Balong land  
*é yami*  
 It is mine  
 Audience: *yami nuwàni o walonge é*  
 I brought this medicine from Balong land

While articulating the words of the incantation, the *nganga* holds the leaves in his right hand and the cock in his left hand, dips the leaves into the clay pot, and rubs them on the woman beginning from her feet, on her knees, her belly, her breasts, and on her forehead. Finally, he gives her the goat and asks her to carry it like a baby. Soon after, the *nganga*, with the help of his apprentice, kills the goat and cock and drops some of their blood in the clay pot. He also peels the outer skin of sugarcane and puts the pieces into the pot and then adds the herbs used on the woman into the pot and brings the mixture to boil as he prepares the *litu* enema for the woman. Finally the *nganga* prepares a *ngweli* which, like in previous rituals, he gives to the woman to lick. This ends the first phase of the *mɔndo* ritual.

The *luuwa* phase of the *isasa* ritual is performed nine days after the end of the first phase. It consists mainly of the preparation of the *itoti* meal and the wearing of the *isasa* around the woman's neck. The *nganga* uses the firewood that was brought by the woman to cook the food. When the food is ready, the *nganga* makes the woman sit on a stool behind the kitchen. He places the food items, one after the other, on her left and right palms. He instructs her to eat the one in her right palm and throw the one in her left palm behind her. She keeps on doing this until the food is finished<sup>3</sup>.

When the woman finishes eating this ritual meal, she is ushered into the *nganga*'s kitchen where she wears the *isasa* (chain of beads) around her neck<sup>4</sup>. The wearing of the chain around the pregnant woman's neck marks the end of the *isasa* ritual. Later on, when she successfully has her baby the woman will transfer the *isasa* to her left wrist. If the woman has a baby girl, she pours water into the *litu* and gives the baby her first enema with it. The enema is not given to male children because it is believed it will render them impotent.

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This article has presented and described the four kinds of rituals that are performed on pregnant women among the Bakweri by four separate *nganga* or traditional doctors. It is quite evident from the rituals discussed in this article and the incantations that accompany them that the Bakweri regard pregnancy as a blessing from the supreme creator, particularly when it is understood that not every woman has the good fortune of becoming pregnant. It is for this reason that the *nganga* acknowledge the importance and presence of their ancestors who assist them to protect the pregnant woman. They also thank their predecessors for training them to become herbalists. This idea ties in with the Bakweri world view in which pregnancy is seen as a blessing from the ancestors to the community. This view is echoed by E.G. Parrinder (1976: 91) in his observation that:

"[...] when a woman announces to her husband or mother that she is pregnant, there is rejoicing and precautions are taken to ensure normal gestation and delivery. These precautions include both medical and spiritual attention. A sacrifice of thanks is made to the Supreme God, or the family or the family gods or ancestors who are naturally interested in reproduction of the family ... prayers are offered for the health of the family and her baby."

Obviously, the pregnant woman moves from one traditional doctor to the other as her pregnancy progresses, and the need for each separate

3. It should be noted that only the pregnant woman eats the *itoti* meal.

4. The *isasa* is an amulet that protects the woman during delivery.

pregnancy ritual arises. The performance of these rituals and the rendition of the incantations that accompany them are connected to the Bakweri belief system and cosmology in which the living, the unborn, and the ancestors are united in a cycle of perpetual continuity. In this regard, the *nganga* invoke the supernatural ancestral power as part of Bakweri traditional religious and social obligations to beseech the ancestors to protect both the expectant mother and the baby, when it is born.

Of particular importance in this article is the performance context or ritual atmosphere in which the pregnancy rituals and their accompanying incantations are performed. The article describes in detail this environment within which each *nganga*, the pregnant woman, and the limited audience interact during the performance of the *lilale*, *mesuma na mavengo*, *mɔndo*, and *isasa* rituals. The surroundings in each of these four rituals include the various items the pregnant woman brings with her and the *nganga*'s herbs and other paraphernalia utilised in the performances. The actions of the *nganga*, those of the pregnant women, and the participation of the other members of the audience, constitute the performance aesthetics of these rituals. It is in this respect that K. Agovi (1994: 10) insists that:

"African societies have always known that verbal expression, even in the most prosaic context communicates effectively when embellished by other forms of expression. They have always known that creative texts and utterances have no validity until they have been made to communicate in performance situation. This is because it is the performance occasion which gives birth to the communication idea, the situation in which sound, movement, words and visual effects are harmonised for man to relate to an integrated level of ideas, thought and feeling at a given location or place."

As Daphne Duval Harrison observes, we can assert that these pregnancy rituals, indeed, constitute an aesthetic tradition. In other words, there are obvious "elements of an African aesthetic which are apparent in ritual activity" (Johnson *et al.* 1982: 5); in so far as there is "recognition of participatory socialization into a cultural reference system as the critical development of [such] an aesthetic tradition" (Johnson *et al.* 1982: 7).

The consideration of this ritual setting reflects Kwakwa's "elements of ritual which contribute to the dramatic effect" in performances. According to Kwakwa, these include: ceremonial paraphernalia, a pre-designated place, pre-assigned roles, and an agreed upon order of appearance of musicians, dancers, priests and other personae involved in the ritual performance (Johnson *et al.* 1982). Like the incantations that complement the performances of each ritual, the atmosphere in each performance, inevitably, constitutes an essential component in the integral actualisation of each pregnancy ritual.

The article also highlights the ambiguous nature of audience participation in the specialised performances of pregnancy rituals and incantations. Although this researcher's concern of the nature and notion of the audience and its exact role in these ritual performances may not have been adequately

resolved, it nevertheless necessitates further inquiry into the nature and function of minimal and passive audience participation in African verbal performances.

Of relevance too in this article is the complementary nature of the incantations that the various *nganga* chant while they perform the different rituals. Evidently, the rituals in question are the primary focus of performance by the *nganga*, the chief celebrants in these performances; with the implication that the incantations they utter in the course of the performances merely complement the actual ritual performances. Paradoxically, the pregnancy rituals would be incomplete and meaningless without the *nganga*'s incantations, because the wholeness and totality of each pregnancy ritual is mutually dependent on its accompanying incantation. This mutual reciprocity between ritual/dramatic performance and verbal art emphasises the complexity involved in investigating African customs and beliefs, particularly those that involve both dramatic performance and verbal art. The ritual/dramatic performances in this article, for example, obviously have overtones of traditional religious practices. At the same time, the performances spill over into the domain of oral literature, anthropology, ethnology, and philosophy. The implication here is that African oral literature does not exist in isolation and would require a more interdisciplinary approach than has hitherto been utilised in its investigation.

*École Normale Supérieure, University of Yaounde I, Yaounde, Cameroon.*

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#### ABSTRACT

This article presents a comprehensive description of the four kinds of rituals that are performed on pregnant women among the Bakweri of South-western Cameroon. These pregnancy rituals are performed to avert abortions, premature deliveries, still births, and to ensure safe delivery. They are also intended to keep the pregnant woman healthy during her gestation period. The four rituals are performed by four separate *nganga* (traditional doctors). The implication here is that the pregnant woman moves from one herbalist to the other as her pregnancy progresses and need for each ritual arises. Of equal significance in this article is the consideration of the incantations that are chanted by each *nganga* and which complement each of the rituals as verbal art. The incantations that accompany the rituals demonstrate the inter-relationship between ritual, performance, and orature. This relationship between performance and the spoken word demonstrates that African oral performance, at least in this instance of pregnancy rituals, does not exist in isolation, but is subordinated to and is an organic consequence of ritual performance. The indications are that Bakweri traditional doctors perform pregnancy rituals and incantations as part of Bakweri traditional religious and social obligations to supplicate the ancestors to guide and protect the expectant mother and to protect the baby when it is born.

#### RÉSUMÉ

*Rites et incantations de grossesse chez les Bakwéri.* — Cet article présente une description extensive de quatre types de rites effectués sur les femmes enceintes chez les Bakwéri au sud-ouest du Cameroun. On entreprend ces rites de grossesse pour éloigner les risques d'avortement, les accouchements prématurés, les mort-nés et pour assurer la sécurité de l'accouchement. Ils sont également destinés à aider la femme enceinte à rester en bonne santé pendant la grossesse. Les quatre rites sont faits par quatre *nganga* (guérisseurs traditionnels). La conséquence est que la femme enceinte va d'un herboriste guérisseur à l'autre au rythme de l'avancement de sa grossesse rendant nécessaire chacun des rites. Également important dans cet article est la prise en compte des incantations prononcées par chaque *nganga*, qui se présentent comme un art verbal qui vient en complément des rites. Ces incantations qui accompagnent les rites mettent en évidence les relations entre rite, performance et littérature orale. Ce lien entre la performance et le mot proféré est la preuve que la performance orale en Afrique, du moins dans ces rites de grossesse, n'existe pas en

isolation, mais est subordonnée à la performance rituelle dont elle se présente comme une conséquence organique. Tout porte à croire que les rites de grossesse et les incantations que font les guérisseurs traditionnels font partie de l'obligation religieuse et sociale traditionnelle dans laquelle se trouvent les Bakwéri de supplier les ancêtres pour qu'ils guident et protègent la future mère ainsi que le bébé après sa naissance.

*Keywords/Mots-clés:* Cameroon, ancestors, Bakweri, incantations, pregnancy rituals, traditional doctor, traditional religion, verbal art/*Cameroun, ancêtres, Bakweri, incantations, rites de grossesse, guérisseur traditionnel, religion traditionnelle, art verbal.*