

developers and urban elites. Alarming to Fulbe—and other livestock raising peoples—is, furthermore, the ominous return of razzias and pillaging in the guise of corrupt administrators, demobilised mercenaries, rebels, robbers, etc.

As to the prospects of Fulbe studies, the chapters by Bonte and Bernardet especially prove that reckoning with neighbouring populations can help to avoid stereotyping or simplifying interpretations. Bernardet argues that conflicts between Fulbe and farmers, although perceived in ethnic terms, cannot be explained without considering each group's internal contradictions. To the author's call for development approaches that associate rather than separate farmers and herdsman, one might add that analytical and theoretical tools are needed to facilitate the analysis of farmer–herdsman relations—and competition for resources in multi-ethnic settings in general—within the framework of a single social system. Otherwise, by assuming competing groups' belonging to different systems, one risks remaining locked up in a vicious circle of difference and separation, the same that also informs many development interventions. This does not mean that one can dispose of the Fulbe as a distinctive category, whatever the extent of reification and fiction involved. In their struggle to deconstruct their object, Fulbe studies cannot but simultaneously strengthen its reification. They are doomed to deal with this paradox, and whether this is a curse or a blessing depends on the category's and the field's capacity to add to our understanding of social reality. This is exactly what *Figures peules* achieves. Finally, it should be stressed that the book's relevance extends beyond the field of Fulbe studies to broader issues of identity strategies, of history and anthropology, and of ethnicity and multiculturalism.

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GERHARD MÜLLER-KOSACK, *The Way of the Beer: ritual re-enactment of history among the Mafa, terrace farmers of the Mandara mountains (North Cameroon)*.

London: Mandaras Publishing, 2003, 408 pp., £10.00, ISBN 0 9544730 0 0 (paperback).

This book is a revised version of a doctoral dissertation submitted in 1997. Müller-Kosack presents us with a very detailed and systematic ethnography of the Mafa population which has for long been identified as the largest ethnic group amongst approximately half a million people living in the northern Mandara Mountains in Cameroon and Nigeria. The Mafa, sometimes called Matakam in the literature (names and ethnic identifications which the author disentangles in a very straightforward manner), number approximately 150,000 people.

Though Müller-Kosack identifies ritual processes as the main objective of his work, he actually gets into a much more comprehensive ethnographic description of the Mafa social organisation. The proposed ritual re-enactment of this local history then becomes a well-suited occasion to revisit much of what has been published on the Mafa in order to confirm or criticise previous analyses.

This tightly knit ethnographic description tries to keep together two somewhat divergent foci: one, the detailed analysis of collective rituals (beer father ceremony, harvest festival and bull festival); the other, all matters which are directly linked to the former or could hopefully help to place them in a wider social and cultural context. This particular methodological option raises difficulties which are manifold: first, it forces the reader into lots of details

which could become a bit dull for those who are not very familiar with Mafa ethnography; second, it leaves open questions about the criteria which were used when selecting some social and cultural items instead of others to support the analysis; third, the reader has to cope with a reticular, rather than a linear pattern of argumentation, a problem which partly stems from the two others. But if one goes beyond those specific constraints, then Müller-Kosack's thick ethnological analysis shows very interesting and relevant insights in revisiting the previous, often sketchy, ethnographic accounts on this population and in linking those descriptive themes together in a more substantiated manner.

From this perspective, chapter 1 on the 'regional context' is particularly helpful and original in putting the Mafa into a wider geographic and social (historical, ethnic) background. This section is also designed by the author to bring together some general features of the social structure. Chapter 2, a short (and the best integrated) part of the book, displays the essential elements of the religious worldview. The author gives here a clear and original interpretation of the cosmological and ontological discourses held by the Mafa. Chapter 3 stands as the biggest section of the book and focuses on 'conceptualising ritual action'. This means lumping together such topics as divination in some of its varied manifestations, domestic and individual rituals (for example marriage, birth and death rituals), collective rituals (the most impressive being the harvest and bull festivals) and a selection of items brought forward in order to shed some brighter light on the central focus of this section.

There is also another line of interpretation which is intertwined with the whole ritual process analysis and which bears on the expression of local power. Chapter 4 deals with this theme through the analysis of the 'local history' of a specific area of the Mafa territory, which was the author's main place of fieldwork. This in-depth analysis of the history, the lineage and genealogical dynamics of a specific area aims to demonstrate that one has to understand 'the way of the beer' to fully grasp the building, distribution and transfer of political power among the Mafa. In other words, the circulation and exchange of sacred beer shows the sequences of the local arrival of kinship groups. But ethnographic evidence equally shows that there is a down-to-earth demographic factor which could give a junior lineage the 'general potential to dominate a senior lineage simply on the grounds of a higher rate of reproduction' (p. 345). The author is then led to conclude that 'the Mafa concept of chieftaincy is not an aristocratic but a common or egalitarian system' (p. 345). That was also the conclusion which anthropologists came to when studying the so-called 'acephalous' political systems long ago. Are the Mafa preoccupied with 'equality' in the exercise of political/ritual power? Or do they try to keep a hold over those people/lineages identified as 'owners' of political power?

Then, playing one against the other (kinship/ritual seniority and demographic weight), the power of the chief of the blacksmiths and the power of the chief of the rain or of the chief of the mountain, for example, could indicate that political power means putting together counterbalancing forces. Following this interpretation could indicate that the Mafa people kept those who exercise power in this straightjacket. This could lead one to leave the egalitarian analysis behind for a more dynamic understanding of the ritual/political power amongst the Mafa. Such an analysis would make it clear that there cannot be such a thing as a Mafa political system without the opposition between the ritual and the territorial chieftaincies.

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