Skulls, Gods, and Revenge in a Bamileke Text

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Introduction

This paper focuses upon a text which deals with various aspects of Bamileke belief in ancestors and gods. The text recounts the story of a neighborhood feud in which the ancestral skulls and the local gods, as well as living people, take revenge and seek reconciliation.

The text was collected in the village of Bangang near the northwest boundary of the Western province of Cameroon. The main language of this area is called Ngyemboon and it belongs to the Mbam-Nkam or Eastern Grassfields sub-group of the Grassfields Bantu language family. The Ngyemboon language is spoken by five different Bamileke chiefdoms having a total population of almost 100,000. Most of the linguistic research on this language has been done by this author over the last eleven years.

The Bamileke people occupy a large plateau which corresponds quite closely with the entire province. While the whole plateau is quite temperate in climate, the chiefdom of Bangang (5,500 ft.) is even more so as it is located in the rolling foothills which lead up to Bamboutos Mountain (9,000 ft.). One result of the healthful climate has been a lower incidence of sickness and death leading over time to large extended families and crowded villages. The population density for the Batcham Sub-Department, which includes Bangang, is now over 700 people to the square mile, making it one of the most densely populated rural areas in the entire country. Most of the 30,000 people living within the boundaries of Bangang village make their living by agriculture, with the men taking care of the cash crop of coffee while the women do most of the work to raise the great variety of food crops found there.

Bamileke groups are known for their strongly hierarchical society. Each of the five chiefdoms is broken down into sub-chiefdoms. These sub-chiefdoms, in turn, are made up of "neighborhoods" ("quartiers" in French) which are composed of many
compounds headed by a neighborhood chief. Each compound is made up of an extended family composed of the head man, his wives and their children. The expensive brideprice forces most young men to wait until almost thirty to marry and form a separate compound, while almost all women are married by fifteen years of age. When a head man dies, one of his sons is chosen as the major beneficiary and inherits all his father's land, his father's wives and most of his personal belongings. Because the dense population results in a scarcity of unused land, the other sons in the family usually end up moving into the various cities throughout the country.

The Bamileke religious system reflects this strongly hierarchical social structure. On the family level, each compound head is responsible for the maintenance of proper relations with the family's ancestors, including the various practices connected with the digging up and reburying of their skulls. In addition, there are various gods, each with its respective sacred place, at each level of Bamileke social structure. As well as the various gods associated with individual compounds, there are those which are associated with each neighborhood, sub-chiefdom and chiefdom. Each of these sacred places, as well as the family's skulls, receive various kinds of sacrifices whenever the interests of that particular social entity are involved. The out-workings of this hierarchical arrangement become clearer in the light of our text.

While living in the village of Bangang over the last eleven years, I have been working mainly as a linguist and Bible translator, helping the local people develop an orthography and publish several small booklets while also helping local pastors and priests translate the New Testament. As one part of my current research contract with the Cameroon government, I was assigned to write an article on some aspect of the traditional religious beliefs of the area in which I was working. My previous desire to someday discover the relationship between Bamileke gods and ancestors led me to study this aspect in particular.

In many other West African religious systems, there exists alongside the more widely-reported "ancestor cult" a parallel system which can be referred to as the "god cult". The parallels between these two kinds of cults are so numerous that the outside observer is tempted to posit that the "gods" are nothing more than "ancestors" who
lived so long ago that people have now forgotten their original identity (Parrinder 1976:43,58). This, however, does not seem to be the case for Bamileke as various gods are named after important peaks in the Bamboutos mountain chain. I decided to try to find out more from local Bamileke elders about the relationship between what I was at that point calling the "skull or ancestor system" and the "god system".

The text which is the focus of this article was recorded in July, 1984 in the village of Bangang. I had asked a young friend of mine (about 35 years old) to take me to visit his elderly father. On the way, I explained to this friend the two major topics I was interested in, namely "skulls" and "gods". I suggested that he ask his father to tell him of his own first-hand experiences, and even suggested using questions like, "How did you begin offering sacrifices on the skull of your father?" and "What happened to cause you to set up your own sacred place dedicated to a local god?" (My friend is a very strong Christian. It was thus the first time the adult son had seriously inquired of his father about these things. This factor no doubt adds a yet unanalyzed - perhaps unanalyzable - flavor to this particular father-son interaction.) My friend agreed to ask his father these questions and the text which resulted surpassed even my high expectations.

Arriving at the family compound, my friend and I were surprised to find the normally busy compound almost empty. The wives and all their children were out in the fields gathering different kinds of food. Only the old man was at home. We found him sitting on a bamboo stool off to one side and drew up our own stools in preparation for an extended visit. The son explained to the father why we had come and that I would only be running the tape recorder and not participating in the conversation. When the old man agreed to this, the tape recorder was turned on and a stirring conversation of about an hour and fifteen minutes was recorded. I present the material that comes at the very beginning of that conversation.

Once the conversation had been recorded, I first got a transcription in the Ngyembبون language in which it was spoken. This was done by Frederic Ngonda, my assistant, a 30-year-old man who has a sixth grade education and has been writing his own language for about nine years. Frederic then translated the entire text into French.
The French translation was then retranslated into English by my wife. The resulting text contained many ambiguities and meaningless or misleading phrases. It was thus only as Frederic and I went slowly over the Nγembo öl and English versions (using French as our common language) that most of the translation problems were ironed out and the English text became comprehensible.

Many of the difficulties we encountered can be described as relating to various points along a language-culture continuum. As in any translation, certain additional information had to be supplied for purely linguistic reasons. One of the major linguistic problems in translating Nγembo öl into French or English lies in the differing sets of pronouns. Nγembo öl is one of the few languages reported to have both logophoric and consecutive pronouns (Anderson 1984:9). The function of these special pronouns is, each in their own respective environment, to refer back to the same subject as in the preceding clause. In those same linguistic environments, the normal subject pronouns are used to refer to a referent different from the one referred to by the subject of the preceding clause. These two pronouns are therefore very useful in keeping discourse referents clear, referents that in English or French would all be translated by an ambiguous "he". To avoid confusion and to convey the clarity of the original text, our translation makes explicit (within parentheses) the various referents intended whenever an ambiguity might arise for an English reader.

Another problem area had to do with figurative language. African languages are particularly rich in their use of idioms and other forms of figurative language. Wherever a literal translation would not clearly convey the intended meaning, this meaning has either been introduced directly or within parentheses into our English translation. In this way, our final translation has been to a large extent "de-figuratized", adding greatly to its comprehensibility for most English speakers.

The remaining translation problems could not be handled by linguistic analysis alone. They had to do with meaning and motive, and required an understanding of the cultural presuppositions of the speaker, what he 'knows' to be true about the cause and effect relations in the world around him. I already had some understanding of the world view of Bamileke people gained from living among them. Frederic, as a
member of the younger generation, helped me to understand some parts of the Bamileke world view better, but even he could not be sure of certain points. (He, too, is a Christian.) Only the original speaker can clarify certain questions that I now know enough to ask. In the meantime, I present the text and our preliminary and partial analysis of its meaning. It should be of particular interest to those involved in the study of the African ancestor complex in general and Bamileke studies in particular.² The solutions to those problems that are fairly clear have been included in parentheses in the text to help the reader. The solutions to some of these problems will be discussed in our interpretation section after the reader has become thoroughly acquainted with the nature of our text. We therefore give you the English translation:

**Text: The Skull and the Sacred Place**

_Son:_ After your father died, what took place before you began to offer sacrifices on his skull? I would like you to tell me how this started after his death. What happened to you and what did you do before you started to offer sacrifices on his skull?

_Father:_ When someone dies, he is buried. After at least three years, you dig up his skull, take it, rebury it in a certain place, (place a stone as an altar over it), prepare a sacrifice, offer it on (the stone altar over) the skull, and say to it, "Now is the day that you must (start) watching carefully over your children."

_Son:_ What happens before the skull is dug up? Before digging it up, does something happen to cause you to do it or not?

_Father:_ Before doing that, before digging it up, you visit the people who are called "seers." They say that in your family, there is a skull that has not been pierced (dug up), and whose skull is it? Four or five persons (seers) will say the same thing. Thus you decide to dig up the skull.

_Son:_ Before going to the seer, there is something that has happened beforehand, isn't there?
Father: Yes, because something (strange) has happened. Before going to the seer, you may have taken a wife, and if you don't do it (go to the seer), she will not be able to have a baby. You can suffer a lot. You can keep taking her to traditional healers or to whites (doctors), but if you don't dig up the skull, put it in a certain place and offer sacrifices to it, she will not be able to have a child.

Son: That is, you can take a wife, and she comes to the marriage but does not give birth to any children. So you go to see the seer who says that she is barren because there is a skull (which has not been dug up).

Father: A dead person who has been buried but his skull has not been dug up.

Son: Because you never dug up the skull. Because you never dug up the skull. Yes, (I see).

Father: After hearing that, you invite people to come dig up the skull.

On the other hand, before doing it (digging up the skull), you may have become sick, and though someone takes care of you, you don't get well. You just don't get any better. Your condition might not improve at all until you visit at least five seers, all of whom say that there is a skull which hasn't been dug up, and (they ask you) where the skull is. That is what makes you dig up a skull.

Son: Concerning your own father's skull, do you know why it was dug up or did you find it already done?

Father: No, no one had already dug up my father's skull. No one had dug it up. We buried my father. After his burial, a certain person made me suffer. He made me suffer by disturbing his (my father's) belongings and by taking others. By taking his things, he made me suffer until a certain old man asked himself why his friend (my father) was like that, why he didn't fight for his possessions; he used to be so strong, what had happened to him after his death? Thus he asked (me) to go with him and dig up his (my father's) skull. We dug up the skull, set it on the ground, and washed it well with water. He sat down next to the skull and spoke to his friend saying, "Look
at this (compound that) you built (like a) chief's compound! Someone has messed it all up, so we ask (you) what happened to you after your death and (we) wonder why this (compound like a) chief's compound is now in such a (sad) state." After this, we reburied the skull in a certain place and offered a sacrifice to it.

Well, he (the skull) immediately got up, took the man who had destroyed his funeral (his belongings) and threw him in the fire where he was badly burned. This same man had left home at about 5 or 6 o'clock and looked for lots of wood which he then used to build a big fire in which he simply laid down and was badly burned. Though he burned himself all over, he neither cried out nor attempted to escape. He burned for some time before someone came out of the house and cried in alarm, telling everyone that the old man was being burned in the fire. They took the man from the fire and carried him to bed.

The next day they (his family) went in several directions, asking (seers) everywhere where was this skull who had pushed the man into the fire because of the stolen belongings. While they were wondering if he could be healed, someone (a seer) told them that he could be if they returned the dead man's belongings. From among the burned man's belongings, they picked out certain ones. They came to our compound and gave back a cow's horn, a gun, and a hat. When I saw them coming (to return these things), I quickly left the compound (to avoid taking back the things). They came into the compound, left the things, and returned home. Even though they did this, the burned man still didn't get any better. They kept begging me to come and brush his body with a live chicken, thus showing that I had forgiven him and held nothing against him, and thereby telling the skull of my father to stop the battle.

(At last,) I went to his compound one morning. They had brought him (the burned man) from the house and placed him in the yard, then caught a chicken. When I came, lots of people were already there. As I arrived, they gave me the (live) chicken. I was supposed to brush his body with it while saying that I forgave him, and that if there was some problem or quarrel (whose responsibility/fault still rested) on his (the burned man's) head, that (I would intercede before) my father so that he would quit (fighting against him). "Today we should all be unified," (they said).
I noticed a person on the other side of the crowd giving me a signal (not to do it), and immediately I said, "Tamo, hold this chicken for a second, hold this chicken for a second." As soon as he took the chicken, I immediately went off. Going behind the house, I found a hole (in the fence) through which I immediately crawled, and then I started to run with (all) my feet on the ground.

Son: Both hands and feet.

Father: When I found myself at a certain place, I continued (running) until I arrived at my compound where I climbed up in the ceiling to hide. The crowd pursued me to the compound, but couldn't find me. When they returned home, the burned man told them to take him into the house to die. "Anyway I can't live," (he said). He stayed in the same condition until he finally died. When he died, I didn't go to the funeral. My mother didn't go either.

After exactly one week of mourning, his widows talked among themselves about how all this had happened and came to agree about it (the cause of the death). They left home singing the song of widowhood. Everyone wondered where the widows of Temtane were going. They walked on singing the widow's song until they reached our old compound. In the compound of my late father where I lived with my mother, there was also a storeroom that I had built with the late Salaki. They came to destroy the buildings. They destroyed the compound by pulling out the stakes (fence surrounding the compound) and throwing them in the courtyard with lots of other things. In my mother's house, they broke the mortar, the pots and other things until everything was ruined. Then they broke down the door to my storeroom and took all that I had kept from my childhood and many other things, and they threw it all in the courtyard before returning home.

At that time, the (paramount) chief was staying at Dschang. My mother and I walked all the way there in order to see him. When we told him all that had happened, the astonished chief cried, "What? What?" When the chief had listened to it all, he sent the late Tafo Mekong who, when he reached (Bangang chiefdom), went (first) to the
market at Bamougong to buy a wooden pot to give to my mother. Then he came to see our home so that he could report on it to the chief.

(Later,) the same old friend of my late father came into our compound to find out what had happened. He said that if this was the way things were going to be, then war must come. So (based on his advice) we gathered up the fence that had been uprooted, the pieces of the pots, the pieces of the pans, and the rest of the debris and took it all over to "Ncwo Meshu" (the sacred place for the whole neighborhood) where we piled it up (to accuse the widows before this god) before returning home.

The wife of the (paramount) chief of Bangang who had led the procession of the widows was also the first-born child of the man who had died of burns. After five months had passed, he (the neighborhood god) grabbed her and threw her on the ground (killed her). He (the god) next grabbed one of the sons of the family, continuing in such a way (one family member after the other) that I thought the whole family would die.

At this time, I thought it over and wondered what I would be able to do alone (without their help in the neighborhood) if this whole family disappeared. Then I asked the same old friend of my father to come (help me). When we had dug up the skull again and washed it well, he (the old friend) said (to it), "Oh, friend of the chief, everyone has seen you make war, but now you should stop. Only the children remain. It seems that all those who took your belongings are already with you (among the dead) so that you are already arguing about it over there (among the dead). You must work out a solution there where you are. Don't come here (among the living) anymore to make war." It was after this that he (the skull) was finally silent.

Son: Thus when he (your enemy who was burned) died, you didn't go (to the funeral), and neither did your mother. If, on the other hand, you had gone, would the skull have left you alone?

Father: Even if the skull left one (me) alone, the sacred place will not leave one (me) alone.
Listen closely, as I forgot something. When his (the burned man's) first-born (daughter mentioned earlier) died and we had heard of it after returning from Maya market, one of my friends talked me into going with him to her funeral. On our way, I had a piece of sugarcane that I sucked on as we walked along and that I was still sucking on as we entered a field. As we were crossing this field to get to the funeral, I felt something in my foot. When I looked, I found that a piece of cornstalk had become embedded in my foot. When I saw this, I was amazed, but I continued to suck on my sugarcane.

As soon as we arrived in the courtyard, I called, "Mimba" (someone's name), and he responded, "Yes." I said, "Look at this!" (He asked,) "What is it?" I said, "Look here where a piece of cornstalk is stuck in my foot." He said, "Yes." I asked him, "Let's operate with a knife to take it out," but he refused saying, "No." I told him, "Give me your pocketknife!" It was a very sharp knife that he kept in his pocket for shaving his head, and he let me use it. I then cut open the place (on my foot) like this (with gestures). When the blood started flowing, he (Mimba) tore up his clothes (here an ideophone for tearing cloth) to wrap up my foot. The people said that I should return home before my foot swelled. I agreed and got to my feet. When I arrived in my compound, my mother said to me, "Well, you got what you were asking for." I said, "Yes, I did. Crush some red pepper for me." When this was done and I had put it all over the wound, someone went to find some fiber which I used to wrap it before resting.

The next morning when I had come out of the house, I lifted my foot like this (with gesture) and noticed that it wasn't swollen, and it didn't hurt at all. Later, the wound healed like this (shows son) and scarred over. That was the end of my (open) wound. Do you understand? This was the reason why I didn't go to the funeral. (Frederic feels it was only because his foot was hurt, but we aren't sure of the speaker's meaning.)
Interpretations

In order to show that cultural beliefs exist separate from the structure of a language, we will now examine our text from a variety of viewpoints. By examining what a cultural outsider could learn about the text and contrasting it with what cultural insiders understand about it, we will see the crucial role that cultural knowledge plays in actually grasping the meaning of a discourse. Even so, not all the members of a given culture share all of the same cultural presuppositions. We will first examine those things which an outside observer might be able to add to the literal text to bring out more clearly its meaning. Then, we will examine the interpretation of this text by Frederic. As a cultural insider, he was able to intuit various facts and motives on the basis of his cultural background. However, since he was not the actual speaker and since as a Christian he does not fully share the belief system of the speaker exemplified in the text, he was at times be unsure of the actual motivations of certain participants and even the meanings of certain actions. Finally, if as we hope we are ever able to question the original storyteller again, we will add the missing dimension of his own more accurate interpretation of why he and various other participants did what they did.

The outside observer without knowledge of the language can nevertheless observe Ngyemboon material culture and thus understand the setting and the props of this drama. One aspect of the setting that is readily available is the spatial relations which exist between the various places mentioned in the text. These can be fairly easily discovered by any interested outsider by simply consulting various maps. Since not all of the places mentioned in the text are found within the boundaries of the Bangang chiefdom, the following maps place the storyteller's neighborhood and Bangang chiefdom within their larger geographical context (place names listed in parentheses are not actually mentioned in the text):
Another aspect of the physical setting for most of the action in our story is the actual layout of a traditional Bamileke compound. One enters a compound through a "gate" which is part of the fence. This opens onto a large piece of ground that is swept clean and used as the main area of interaction. Around the sides are various houses, usually one house for each wife facing each other across the compound. Opposite the door of the compound, one finds the main house which is the house of the headman. While most of the houses are constructed of solid mud blocks with metal roofs, the headman's house is often constructed with concrete blocks. Behind this house, the headman often has a second smaller house where he can relax when he is "not at home" (not officially available). Most compounds are surrounded by a sturdy fence constructed of palings (small trees two to four inches in diameter) placed so closely together that animals (and humans) cannot enter the compound except through the
front gate. Our protagonist, therefore, was quite fortunate to find a hole in the fence through which he was able to force his way.

The interested outsider can also fairly easily acquaint himself with the physical form of the various places where sacrifices are offered. There are two variations for each kind of place where sacrifices are made according to whether they are being offered to the gods or to the ancestors. Often a man will have one or several sacred places within the boundaries of his land. One kind of sacred place consists of a tree planted especially because a specific god requested it. At the base of this tree, one will find the stone where the sacrifice is offered. The other kind of sacred place is slightly more elaborate and consists of a miniature Bamileke-style house (about four feet by four feet by four feet tall) built to shelter the stone where the sacrifice is made. The skulls are buried either in the corners of one of the main houses or in a separate miniature house. They always have a stone or a sacrificial bowl placed on top of the skull where the sacrifice is actually offered. Common sacrifices are sheep, goats, chickens, salt, palm wine and palm oil. The being in question is said to have accepted the sacrifice when birds and ants have made it disappear.

Now that we have examined several observations that might easily be made by a cultural outsider, we will look at the additional information that is communicated to someone who grew up within the cultural framework. For this task, we have again asked Frederic for his intuitions. Because of his work on the preliminary transcription and resulting translations, he is quite familiar with the facts related in the text. Though he is about a generation younger than the storyteller, he has spent almost his entire life in the same chieftdom and has thus not lost touch with the traditions as have some of his friends who spent many years going to school in the larger cities. On the other hand, as a Christian, he does not believe in some of these practices and has not learned as much about them as a non-Christian might.

One of the questions which arose out of the text was how and why the "burned man" was able to come into possession of the goods belonging to the man that had died. I asked Frederic if the "burned man" and the dead man were related. Frederic surmised that the two were not related because the storyteller referred to the burned man many
times without once referring to him by any kinship term. On the contrary, Frederic felt that the two men were formerly close friends. This intuition seems to be borne out by a later monologue (not included in this paper) in which the storyteller relates how his father (the dead man in our story), while he was yet alive, had miraculously been saved from death before a German firing squad for the crime of selling slaves. When this man returned from being imprisoned in the distant town of Bamenda, he spend three days visiting at Temtane (the "burned man")'s house before he even went to his own compound. This fact seems to substantiate Frederic's intuition that the two men used to be quite close friends.

So, why and how would someone steal various possessions from one's dead friend? This question led to an extended discussion of the role of a man's friends when he dies. It turns out that a man's closest friends play a significant role in planning and carrying out his funeral. They actually move into the dead man's house for the week or two of an important man's funeral. They not only supervise the proceedings, but also play the crucial role in revealing who has been selected to be the heir and in dividing up his remaining possessions between the other members of his family. A man never tells a child that he has chosen him to be his heir. Instead, he tells his best friends which son he has selected. At the funeral, it is thus his friends who inform the child that he has been chosen to inherit all the land, all the wives and the majority of the accumulated possessions which belonged to his father. The rest of the dead man's possessions are divided up between the rest of the family with the man's friends, once again, overseeing the entire operation. Because of their crucial role in dividing up and passing on a man's inheritance, a man's friends are often put into a position where they are occasionally tempted to help themselves to some of the man's belongings for themselves. This practice is not winked at, but on the contrary is looked down upon by everyone as a form of stealing. It appears that in our story, the "burned man" took some of the dead man's belongings, most of which he should have passed on to the heir (the storyteller). Thus, once he had been seriously burned through the agency of the vengeful skull, his family (following the counsel of a seer) brought back the stolen items as a means of trying to save his life.
The role of seers is quite important in the text, as it is in Ngyembɔɔn life in general. Often in the text, a seer was referred to by an indefinite pronoun. It was thus only because of Frederic's intuition that we were able to clarify when a seer was definitely being referred to. Frederic appeared to base his opinion of the pronoun's intended referents on the nature of the words or actions attributed to them. There are certain functions specifically assigned to seers, the most important of these being to tell a person the unknown cause of something extremely bad (or good) that has come into his life.

Frederic was also familiar with the "chicken-brushing ceremony". To brush another person with a live chicken seems to be a means of publically declaring that one forgives or at least forswears continuing revenge. In the text, this forgiveness or truce would have had the implication of also forcing the storyteller to call off the skull thus allowing the burned man to regain his health. In our text at least, to brush someone with a chicken seems to be a powerful public means of calling off a feud.

Another place where Frederic's intuitions were helpful was in relation to the relative social importance of first-born children and chief's wives. It seemed important to me that the first-born daughter of the "burned man" was also the paramount chief's wife. My main interest at this point was in where this band of widows got the courage to (do the culturally proscribed action of) destroy the entire compound of a dominant family in the neighborhood. While I assumed that it was the daughter's status as chief's wife that gave the others the courage to help her carry out her revenge, Frederic informed me that this was not the case. He assured me that the social importance of a first-born child is very great, so great that even older women among the widows would be inclined to follow her lead. It was therefore his feeling that the story would have been much the same even if the first-born child had not been married to the paramount chief.

Another interesting area of Frederic's intuition concerned the roles associated with various generations. From the story itself, it is fairly obvious that the "old friend" was of the same generation as the dead man. It is interesting that it was this man of a generation older than the storyteller who functioned as his counselor. It was he who
originally came and talked the speaker into digging up the skull of his father. It was also he who got the speaker to take all the debris from the destroyed compound and pile it up at the sacred place as an accusation against the widow's band. On the other hand, it was not at all obvious to me to what generation the "late Salaki" (the minor character only mentioned for his role in helping the storyteller build a storehouse) belonged. While I assumed that this man also belonged to the storyteller's father's generation because he, too, was already dead, Frederic assured me that the man was a friend of the storyteller and belonged to the storyteller's generation. The background for this intuition was based on two of Frederic's inferences from common cultural patterns: first, that a man builds a house with the help of his friends, and second, that people choose their friends from their own generation.

The final area of useful intuitions supplied by Frederic was in regard to the relative importance of the skull and the god place. I asked Frederic why the speaker, when his compound had been devastated by the angry band of widows, had not just gone and made another sacrifice on his father's skull. His father's skull had surely dealt quickly and powerfully with his first enemy, so why bring the god into it? Couldn't the skull have dealt just as thoroughly with this second threat to the family? It was only at this point that it became clear that the sacred place involved was not one of the sacred places of the storyteller's compound. So, following the advice of his father's old friend, the storyteller had appealed to a higher authority, as it were, and accused the band of widows before the sacred place of the entire neighborhood. It seems that the skull had done all that it had been asked to do and that in the new circumstances, an appeal to the higher (and assumed more powerful) god was needed. Still, the question remains. On what basis did the storyteller's counselor feel that the destruction of the compound was a matter for the neighborhood god to deal with while the theft of part of an inheritance could be dealt with by the skull involved? On this crucial question, Frederic had no insight.

The last parentheses in our text points up a crucial question of interpretation, namely the reason the storyteller went back and included the final episode about getting a piece of cornstalk embedded in his foot. Perhaps because of his Christian background, Frederic's intuition on this point seems to reflect surface realities. He felt that the
purpose of the final episode was to show that the reason the storyteller didn't go to the first-born's funeral was that (though his foot didn't swell up from infection), he was unable to travel because his foot was still healing. Another possible interpretation of this episode is that it is told to the son as an example of the kind of thing that can happen when one does not properly anticipate the reactions of the local gods. If this were so, then the whole episode would be an oblique answer to the son's perceptive question of why the storyteller and his mother did not attend the burned man's funeral. This question, and others like it, point up the importance of getting back to the storyteller himself to clarify various points of information and to see which of Frederic's intuitions will and which will not be borne out.

**Implications**

Our short text provides an excellent example of the fact that language is not a self-contained system but is built upon the belief system of the users. This point was made by Keesing when he wrote that "language rests on and draws on cultural premises about the world (1979:14)." A particularly clear example of this undergirding role of culture occurs in our story when it is seen in relation to the relatively simple task discussed earlier of identifying the referents indicated by various pronouns. In the narrative, the storyteller and his father's friend dig up the skull and wash it. After the older man speaks to the skull, they rebury it and offer a sacrifice to it. At this moment, the text says that "he (different subject) immediately got up" and threw his enemy into the fire. As an outsider with my own assumptions, I was at a loss to identify who had carried out this important action. Since the pronoun used definitely pointed to a different subject than the immediate context, and since the last person referred to in the singular was the dead man's friend, it seemed that the only participant available was the storyteller himself. Surely he would not suddenly switch from the first person to the third person, yet that seemed the only possible explanation until Frederic told me otherwise. My cultural "blind spot" had caused me to see only two possible actors (that is, the two living human beings) present at this point in the story. According to Bamileke premises, however, there were already three potential agents present and thus it was clear that it was the third participant (the skull) who had acted in such a powerful and decisive manner. Thus even a
simple linguistic task like referent identification can be easily skewed by the cultural presuppositions of the investigator.

As a final point, I hope that the present text might trigger a more thorough study of the role of ancestors in feuding and revenge within the African ancestor complex. Kopytoff (1973), in his excellent review of the common features of this complex, does not even mention these roles. Keesing, whose Kwaio informants in the Soloman Islands are also greatly concerned with such behavior by their ancestors, apparently experienced the same need to operate at least temporarily with their presuppositions if he wanted to understand them. For certain Kwaio speech acts, he says (1979:32; emphasis mine),

"At the very least, to understand such usages we need to know that ancestors are participants (albeit unseen and usually silent ones) in every conversation. This basic sociolinguistic fact may not be part of the 'linguistic knowledge' of Kwaio speakers, but the pragmatics of speech can hardly be understood if we lose sight of it; Kwaio pagans cannot afford to.

Bamileke like the ones in this drama cannot afford to either, as this text so forcefully illustrates.

**NOTES**

1. I have been able to live in and conduct research in Cameroon thanks to a series of research permits with various governmental entities. The research upon which this article is based was carried out under the Ministry for Higher Education and Scientific Research, the Institute of Human Science and the Center for Anthropological Studies and Research. The actual form of the paper has benefited greatly from many suggestions made by Elinor Abbot for which I am extremely grateful. Not to be forgotten are the many hours of patient work that Frederic Ngonda accomplished, without which this paper would have never been written.
For the interested researcher, an Ngyembɔɔn-French word-by-word version of the text is available from the author at B.P. 1299, Yaoundé, Cameroon. Also available are a 1500-word French-Ngyembɔɔn lexicon (Anderson, 1976) and the first draft of an 1800-word Ngyembɔɔn-French and French-Ngyembɔɔn dictionary with full dictionary entries.

REFERENCES


