Between cattle and Islam: Shifting social and gendered significance of cattle among the Mbororo pastoralists in Cameroon

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the symbolic importance of cattle as a supreme animal among the pastoral seminomadic Mbororo people of Cameroon. As for many other pastoral people, cattle for Mbororo undoubtedly form a dominant symbol in the Turnerian sense, in that they have the capacity to draw new meanings in altered situations. This paper explores such meanings in altered situations of three spheres of life:

1. the analysis of the changing role of cattle in establishing and sustaining kinship and marriage ties reveals how patrilineal ties are reproduced through the cattle inheritance system, where not only cattle owned by men but also those owned by women strengthen the patrilineage in an endogamic pastoral group.

2. the analysis of the changing significance of animals with religious change reveals a certain change from cattle to sheep in the sacrifice practice, which is a direct influence of islamisation. However, cattle retain ritual symbolic significance even in rituals of the islamic calendar as additional sacrifice alongside sheep, leading to a double ritual practice for the same occasion.

3. the analysis of the gendered significance of animals and their products shows how the pastoralists’ continued cultural rapprochement with Muslims living in villages has influenced their views of allocation of cattle to women, who for example according to Islamic norms are not any more allowed to sell milk themselves.

During the interconnected processes of Islamization and sedentarization, the Mbororo have found new “traditional” ways to employ cattle symbolically in order to substitute the old disappearing ones. The paper shows that the pressures for change, coming from outside the pastoral group, have resulted in “re-invention” or “multivocalization” of the meaning of cattle, and thus ultimately have provided a sense of cultural continuity, as the Mbororo seek to make their lives and their place meaningful in the changing world.

Keywords: animal symbolism, cattle, Cameroon, Islamisation, gender

INTRODUCTION

Since E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1940; 1951; 1956) and Godfrey Lienhardt (1961) wrote their classic studies of the nomadic pastoralists of East Africa, the socio-symbolic
meaning of cattle, i.e. the meaning that surpasses their purely utilitarian value, has recurrently fascinated anthropologists doing research on peoples herding cattle. As Jean Comaroff (1985, 72) notes, while referring to the above scholars, the role of cattle “as the symbolic extension of the human persona, linking man and spirit and providing metaphors of social relations” has been a perennial theme in African anthropological literature. Comaroff herself, in her historical study of the Tswana people in South Africa, underlined the role of cattle as double signifiers, which appear “simultaneously to personify individual identities, values, and ties, and act as generalized icons of the social structure qua structure,” thus “speaking both to the particular and the general” (ibid.), and infusing the personifying quality of the cattle with their naturalizing function in the wider ideological frame.

James Ferguson (1985, 649) has also highlighted the ideological dimension while examining what he calls the ‘bovine mystique’ among the Basotho of Lesotho. This ‘mystique’ is a set of cultural rules that define and valorize livestock as a special category of property, and these rules make cattle the property most embedded in social relations and closely connected to local power relations that are centered on hierarchical relations between such categories of people as men/women, senior/junior, and patron/client. Finally, Sharon Hutchinson, retracing, and even going beyond, the Evans-Pritchardian human/cattle equation among the Nuer of East Africa, encapsulates the fundamental identity between cattle and the Nuer by stating that through cattle “individuals were able to transcend some of the profoundest of human frailties and thereby achieve a greater sense of mastery over their world: death became surmountable, infertility reversible, and illness something that could be actively defined and cured” (1992, 296). In this article1 I will link my own research with the above anthropological discussions by exploring the divergent ways in which cattle play a central role in the mediation of social relations and gender among the seminomadic agropastoral Mbororo of Cameroon.

**SETTING THE SCENE**

The Mbororo belong to the Fulbe ethnic category, which is nowadays spread over large areas of the Sudan belt of West and East Africa. They are distinguishable from the “town” or “village” Fulbe (Fulbe wuro)2 who gave up pastoralism at an earlier phase in Fulbe history and shifted to various urban sources of livelihood. Among the Fulbe of Cameroon the current division between the village Fulbe and the pastoral Fulbe is based on the migration of two culturally and economically differentiated groups that arrived in Cameroon in successive order. The first, the one that nowa-

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1. The article is mainly based on ethnographic data first published in my dissertation *Performance and Performativity on Pastoral Fulbe Culture* (2003). For my research I conducted anthropological fieldwork in 1994-1996 and 1998, for 16 months in total, in the surroundings of Tibati, the administrative centre of the Djérem Department, Adamawa Province, Cameroon. The research was part of the project *Changing Gender Relations in Three African Communities*, funded by the Academy of Finland, and directed by Professor Karen Armstrong. Additional funding was provided by the Graduate School of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, University of Helsinki, and the Nordic Africa Institute, Uppsala. Supplementary data was collected during my two shorter field trips to the same area in 2004 and 2005, of which for the latter I received a NIAS travel grant as well.

2. In the transcription of Fulfulde, the language of the Mbororo and other Fulbe, I follow Noye (1989).
days forms the sedentary village Fulbe society of Northern Cameroon and the traditional Muslim power elite of the region, had virtually finished its migration from Bornu Empire of the Central Sudan Belt into the region by the turn of the nineteenth century. In my field site in the Adamaoua Province of Cameroon, as in many other places in West Africa, the village Fulbe have intermingled with the local people. In Adamaoua this has occurred with such groups as Mbum, Wute, and Hausa of Nigerian origin through intermarriages. The second group, known as the Mbororo Fulbe, started to move into Cameroon in the second half of the nineteenth century from Bauchi, located in present-day Nigeria, and their migration into the region has continued until recent times. Unlike the village Fulbe, intermarriages between pastoral Mbororo and other ethnic groups are rare.3

Situated at the bottom of the local power hierarchy of Adamaoua, the Mbororo, who are for the most part illiterate, are culturally and politically marginalized. Concomitantly, they are considered as “the least Islamic” Muslims of the region irrespective of the fact that nowadays most of them perform the Islamic daily prayers, fast during the Ramadan, and an increasing number of those who have enough cattle to invest in a costly journey go on a pilgrimage to Mecca. For subsistence, the Mbororo practice animal husbandry and also cultivate land. This is enabled by the humid climate of Adamaoua where the pastoralists can stay with their herds most of the year in the same place, so that only some of the camp members move out for transhumance for three or four months from the main camp.4 However, they consider themselves first and foremost cattle herders, the cattle providing them with a cultural identity distinguishing them from others. Apart from cattle, many Mbororo have a few sheep and some also keep chickens. Traditionally the Mbororo have been so called milk pastoralists, but the increased commercialization of cattle rearing in Adamaoua has led to a gradual shift from milk yielding pastoralism to meat producing one, meaning that an increasing number of animals are sold for meat. Irrespective of this development, cattle still symbolize the deep moral values and the integrity of the pastoral group. For the Mbororo, the close socio-moral bond between themselves and their herd is reflected, for example, in the cultural ideal of circulating the cattle only in one’s own group or “own people” (himBe am), often conceived as one’s lineage (leyol).

In exploring the ways in which the possession or raising of cattle mediates social relations and gender among the Mbororo, I will examine two specific cultural contexts in which this mediation takes place. First, I will look at the central role that cattle have in mediating kinship, especially in the reproduction of the patrilineal ties through the Mbororo cattle inheritance system, which is underpinned by intergenerational cattle transfers through both male and female lines.5 Second, I will look at the

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3 It should be added that, regarding the overall situation in Adamaoua, the dichotomy between the pan-ethnic Muslim population living in villages and towns and the Mbororo living in the bush is an oversimplification, as there are also Christian people living in villages of Adamaua, and in the savannah. In addition to the Mbororo, for example, there are numerous Gbaya farmers, both Muslim and Christian, living in this area.

4 While still living in Northern Nigeria, the Mbororo were forced to be much more mobile because of the long dry season of the region.

5 The Mbororo have a patrilineal descent system in which individuals belong to their father’s descent group. In addition, they prefer endogamic marriages the most appreciated of which is the marriage between patrilat-
role of animal sacrifices in the Mbororo traditional life cycle rituals, and, at the same
time, discuss the gendered meanings of cattle in these rituals. Thus, in my analysis
the social significance of cattle refers to different levels of “social,” including both
gendered individuals and their relations to others, as well as kin groups and the
pastoral community at large.

LIVESTOCK AND CULTURAL CHANGE

After the heyday of the British structural-functionalism in anthropology, the cultures
that had been the subjects of these studies were gradually stripped of their ahistorical
vacuum. This development enabled researchers to study cultural change. A ques-
tion to be asked then was: what happens to key symbols or objects that have represen-
ted the social and cultural continuity for people when the group is faced with a
process of change? One way to search for an answer is to look at the symbols them-
"elves, and focus on what Victor Turner (1967; 1968) has defined as their multivocal
and multi-faceted character. For Turner, whose main interest concerned dominant
symbols frequently used in collective rituals, the symbols of rituals were storage
units of information, i.e. “multi-faceted mnemonics, with each facet corresponding
to a specific cluster of values, norms, beliefs, sentiments, social roles and relations-
ships within the total cultural system of the community performing the rituals”
(1968, 1). Due to this multi-faceted character, a symbol acts as a magnet that draws
new meanings, and so it can accommodate itself to new situations. To put it differ-
ently, certain symbols have the capacity for rich connotational enlargement, and thus
they can provide a sense of continuity in the process of change, even though their
meaning can be altered (Swartz 1970). Furthermore, it is not sufficient to examine
the changes taking place in the meanings of the symbols as such, but also, as Jean
and John Comaroff (1990, 196) have stated, “the transformation of any society
should be revealed by the changing relations of persons to objects within it.”

Anthropological research has offered descriptions of how pressures for change
have affected the socio-symbolic meaning of animals in societies keeping livestock.
An illustrative example of this is given by Hutchinson (1992; 1996) in her study of
how coping with the long Sudanese civil war has shaped the Nuer’s conceptualization
of their cattle in relation to more recently introduced wealth categories such as
money and guns. Ferguson’s study (1985, 659–662), in turn, indicates that among the
Basotho in Lesotho cattle cannot be isolated into a distinct “traditional” sphere of
exchange, as investment in cattle, and the social prestige that this involves, is
extremely dependent on the money that the adult men earn as migrant laborers in
South African mines. Ferguson’s example shows how livestock is also often consid-
ered a special category of prestige in societies in which animal husbandry does not
form the main source of subsistence (see also e.g. Bohannan 1959).

In this article the question of change is taken into account by paying special atten-
tion to how the Islamization and sedentarization of the Mbororo have reshaped the
meanings attached to animals in the inheritance system, and other forms of cattle
transfer, as well as in the ritual sphere. I will describe the ways in which the pasto-
ralists’ continued cultural rapprochement with Muslims living in villages has influ-

eral parallel cousins.
enced their views of allocation of cattle to women. I will also give an example of how the Islamization of the Mbororo has affected the use and cultural ranking of different animals in a specific ritual central to the social reproduction of the whole pastoral community. Here the analysis will embrace still another layer of “social” by introducing the emerging Islamic interpretations of the significance of animals, especially sheep, in Mbororo culture.

**MEDIATING SOCIAL BONDS THROUGH CATTLE**

In African cattle herding communities, animal circulation has generally been connected to the most important events in the human life cycle, i.e. birth (animals for the newborn as presents), marriage (bride wealth, dowry etc.), and death (animal inheritance). M. M. Ring (1990, 94) has emphasized that, among the East African Dinka, rights to use inherited cattle unifies the heirs, and thus cements social relations. As for cattle circulation during the marriage procedure, in the Basotho community in Lesotho, bridewealth paid in livestock is the most important inter-generational transfer of wealth (Fergusson 1985, 666). Among the Nuer, in addition to the “ordinary” bridewealth cattle that are donated to specific relatives of the bride and to be affiliated to the so called ancestral herd, a kinsman is obliged to marry a ghost wife in the name of a deceased relative having died heirless. In both cases, it is ultimately through cattle, not semen, that patrilineal descent is traced among the Nuer (Hutchinson 1996, 62, 140, 173).

Unlike many other African cattle herders, the Mbororo, or “bush Fulbe” (Fulbe ladde) as many of them still call themselves, of Cameroon do not pay cattle bridewealth. Instead, an indirect dowry, which is intended to be used to buy necessary goods for the bride, is paid in cash by the groom’s parents to those of the bride in two parts. With the first part of the indirect dowry money personal utility goods such as clothes, sandals, bijouterie, soap, a suitcase, and bedclothes are bought for the bride by her parents when she moves to her husband’s camp for the first time. The core of the second part is composed of household utensils such as calabashes, pots, bowls, pails, a mattress, and a blanket. These things are bought for the young wife when she returns from her father’s camp to her husband after having weaned her first child, that is, when the latter is approximately 18–24 months old. It should be added that, even though Mbororo do not pay cattle bridewealth, the indirect dowry money comes from cattle sales. Nevertheless, the absence of cattle bridewealth means that it is through the cattle inheritance system that the large majority of animals are transferred within the pastoral group. Most of a man’s cattle are inherited by his sons in a system that Marquerite Dupire (1970, 152) has called “pré-heritage” (Fr. préhérage) in which each son inherits his share of the father’s stock at the time of his first marriage. To be more accurate, the foundation of his herd is laid at the age of seven, when a cow, called hooreji, is chosen for him from his father’s herd, so that at the time of his first marriage there is already a small herd waiting for

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6 With the term *prérhérage* Dupire (1970, 152) emphasizes the difference between the cattle Fulbe (Mbororo) and other Muslim people in the Sudan belt. Among the latter the division of inheritance, whether this consists of cattle or other sorts of wealth, is postponed to the moment of the father’s death.
him. Gradually the young boy starts to herd and take care of the cattle, but receives the right to decide the affairs his cattle (e.g. cattle sales) only after having married.

Some of the West African pastoral Fulbe groups are known for their traditional cattle lending and circulation systems which have guaranteed that also those who have lost their cattle for some reason are offered the opportunity to reconstruct their herds. For example among the Wodaabe of Niger, the most nomadic Fulbe in the Western Sudan belt, there is an institution called *hubbanae* ("tying cows") which means that people lend each other cows, and the borrower can keep three calves of the borrowed cow before returning it to its owner (e.g. Maliki 1988, 178–179; Swift ed. 1984, 301, 315). According to Mette Bovin (1999, 52), these institutions have, however, have died out in places such as northern Burkina Faso. As Mirjam de Bruijn and Han van Dijk (1996, 316) note, very little has been written about cattle lending systems in other Fulbe groups. Regarding the Fulbe of Central Mali, who are the focus of the research conducted de Bruijn and van Dijk, the authors state that "Someone owning a large herd is certainly not obliged to give cattle to others, even his brother" (ibid., 327)." They continue later, “The situation... does not seem to conform to a generally held picture of social security arrangements and livestock transfers in pastoral societies. Very few livestock transfers take place outside the circle of close kin” (ibid., 329).

In Adamaua, as in many other places in Cameroon and beyond, there are Mbororo who have only few animals or no cattle at all. The overall situation is not, however, as difficult for many pastoralists in Cameroon as it has been for those Malian cattle herders who have suffered from drastic cattle losses due to severe droughts. But although the circumstances in Central Mali and the field site in the Adamaua Highlands of Central Cameroon are quite different, de Bruijn and van Dijk's description could be applied to the latter location as well. The same individualization or "privatization" of cattle ownership can be observed in both countries. Among the Cameroonian Mbororo, one central feature that has accelerated this development is the intensified sedentarization that has brought about changes in the socio-economic organization of this pastoral community. One such change, observed by René Dognin (1973) in Cameroon and by Moses Awogbade (1983) in the Jos Plateau in Nigeria, is the concentration of decision-making in the hands of the household head, that is, the father. As Awogbade (ibid., 22) notes, due to the extended authority of the father, it now takes ten or fifteen years longer for a pastoralist man in the Jos Plateau to set up his own autonomous camp than it has in the past. Similarly, Dognin (1975, 310–311) notes that the pattern of segmentation of families through the out-migration of young adult men has drastically declined as the pastoral Mbororo Fulbe have migrated to Cameroon. Another change, related to the increased authority of the father, is the emergence of the atomistic three-generation camps, each pursuing its own economic interests without significant pastoral co-operation with other camps (Awogbade 1983, 21–22). In addition, the sedentarization itself has decreased the need for co-ordination of seasonal movements.

As Tim Ingold (1986, 168) has aptly remarked “the pastoral animal carries around the pastoralist's social relations.” In the present-day Cameroon, most intragroup cattle transfers are restricted to inheritance from father to son, and thus the most impor-
tant relationship that is carried by these animals is the one between lineal male relatives. In addition, I have observed occasions when Mbororo men who have greater cattle wealth donate calves to the sons of their less wealthy patrilineal male relatives, but these donations are extremely rare in comparison to the number of animals inherited through the father-son line. Another form of animal transfer worth mentioning is that of cattle given to women, either as inheritance or through marriage. In numbers the cattle owned by Mbororo women are few, to the point of being a subject of derision among their owners. This is because cattle are given to girls according to a very different set of principles than they are for boys. In the daughter’s case, the father chooses a cow for her, but only when she has given birth to her first child, and even before that, another cow (sadaaki) has been given to her by her husband as a seal of their marriage, which increases the number of her cows to two.

The earlier timing of men’s inheritance ensures that a woman’s cattle wealth can never reach the same level as that of her brother. Additionally, although principally none of the cattle belonging to the women including the cow given by the father, the sadaaki cow, and any offspring of these animals can be sold without the woman’s permission, her exclusive power to decide the affairs of her cattle is not always respected in practice. The fact that usually a woman does not hurry to move the cow given by the father to her husband’s camp but, instead, is inclined to keep it and its calves in her father’s care even years after the birth of her first child illustrates that in these matters a husband is never as trusted as one’s father. I have followed several cases in which it was clear that the husbands had quite careless attitudes towards the animals of their wives (see Vratanen 2003, 210–211).

Irrespective of how many or few animals women manage to acquire and keep, there exists a general consensus of what they should finally do with them. Thus, if a woman has managed to build herself a small herd, her principal aim is to do as her husband does and distribute most, if not all, of her animals among her own children. During my fieldwork I noticed that some Mbororo women have a tendency to give a slightly larger number of animals to her favorite children than to others (for an example, see Vratanen 2003, 211–212), but the quantitative differences between the cattle given to favorite children and to others on the one hand, and to sons and to daughters on the other hand, were not large, even though boys usually receive slightly more animals than do daughters. The difference between the cattle given by the father and the mother is that, while the mother gives cattle to each child only when the child has reached adulthood, the father gives the standard number of one cow to each daughter at the time of her marriage, but rears animals for his sons little by little so that, at the time the sons set up their own households, each of them have a herd of their own. Most of women’s cattle, i.e. those given to sons, strengthen their husbands’ patrilineage. At the same time, however, many of these inherited cows and bulls underpin the mother’s patrilineage as well, as the Mbororo prefer endogamic marriages, and thus a husband and his wife are often patrilateral parallel cousins or patrilineally related in some other way.

Finally, it is interesting to examine to what extent the Islamization of the Mbororo and their continued rapprochement with the Muslim villagers has affected the Mbororo cattle inheritance system. In earlier studies it has been highlighted how the
adoption of the Islamic Maliki system of inheritance, in which the daughter inherits half of her brother’s share, has improved women’s position among the more sedentary pastoral Fulbe in Nigeria (Hopen 1958; Waters-Bayer 1988). In the data I gathered, however, there is not the slightest indication that the pastoralists in Adamaoua in Cameroon would reshape their inheritance practices toward a system of that sort, and so the bulk of the cattle are still transferred from fathers to sons. In addition, during my fieldwork I have even observed a tendency among some pastoralist men to substitute the *sadaaki* cow with a gift of money, and thus further cut down their wives’ connections to cattle. This practice was justified by the men as a “new” interpretation of Islamic law.

**LIVESTOCK AND GENDER IN RITUALS**

When considering the social significance of livestock in pastoral societies, analysis cannot be restricted to living animals circulated among persons and groups. At least as much attention should be paid to the important role that the pastoral products have in objectifying social identities and relations. The anthropological literature on cattle herding societies is filled with descriptions of the importance of animal sacrifices and milk sharing for people’s communal identities and individual transitions (e.g. Evans-Pritchard 1956; Hutchinson 1996; Lienhardt 1961; Llewelyn-Davies 1981; Rigby 1971). Among the Mbororo, as in many other cattle herding groups in Africa (e.g. Dahl 1987; Talle 1988), there is a symbolic division between the “masculine” cattle and “feminine” milk which can be observed in the daily schedule of men and women. It is the men who, after milking the cows in the cattle corral, take their herds to pasture and watering places, or to the local cattle market on certain weekdays, to return only at sunset. Many of the women’s activities, in turn, are centered in the place where the milk is reserved, that is, in the woman’s own hut (*cuudu*) where a part of the milk is distributed among the children, and another part “put to sleep” for one night to become sour milk for butter, which is separated by shaking in a gourd. After these preparations the woman pours the sour milk with butter balls into a calabash and takes it the marketplace to sell.7

To better understand the male/cattle vs. female/milk dichotomy in the Mbororo society, I would like to employ Marilyn Strathern’s (1988) discussion of gendered gifts, which she defines as objects or substances in which men’s and women’s influence in the society is objectified or, to put it differently, through which their influence is mediated. She writes: “By objectification I understand the manner in which persons and things are construed as having value, that is, are objects of people’s subjective regard or of their creation” (ibid., 176). Among the Mbororo, it is the cattle for men, and milk for women that objectify their effect by moving or flowing through different spheres of their activity.8 In the following, I will focus on how this objectification or mediation takes place in the ritual sphere of the Mbororo social life.

Among the Mbororo, the most central rituals in the social reproduction of the whole pastoral community are those related to the marriage procedure. Although

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7 In fact many women sell most of the dairy products to their private clients on their way to the market.

8 For a more nuanced analysis of the socio-symbolic value of milk to Mbororo women, see Virtanen (2003, 196–209).
the number of these rituals has decreased due to Islamization,⁹ there are still some five or six ritualized occasions related to contracting a marriage. A short description of these rituals is as follows.¹⁰ The procedure begins with a ritual called koggal, the name of which derives from the koggal marriage, that is, from the arranged first marriage for which this ceremony serves as a commencement. During koggal a symbolic hut is constructed in the camp of the bride’s parents of long branches of a specific tree called barkechi (Bauchinia reticulata), which in Mbororo understanding has a blessing effect, by tying their tops together. This ritual is to be performed approximately two years before the bride is taken to live with her groom, i.e. when she is 11–13 years old. Amongst the described rituals described here, koggal is the one that is currently most rarely carried out in Adamaoua, and people are in no way expected to perform this ceremony. Another ritual that can be seen as having become a substitution for the koggal is the Islamic kaBBal (literally “tying of marriage”) in which a mallum, i.e. a person with Koranic schooling, confirms the marriage in the presence of two witnesses, presenting the bride’s and groom’s kin respectively. Here the marriage is sealed by the distribution of cola nuts among those present and by the groom’s representative paying the rubu, the marriage fee of 5,000 CFA francs,¹¹ to the representative of the bride. Next, usually several months after the kaBBal, the groom’s female relative, typically the mother, comes to fetch the bride to live with her son. Before the bride leaves, her mother presents the things bought to the bride with the first indirect dowry. After arriving in her husband’s camp the young woman helps her mother-in-law with daily routines and then returns to her parents’ camp during the last months of her first pregnancy. This boofido (“hatcher”) period will cover the time till the weaning of her firstborn child. Meanwhile, seven days after the birth of the baby, the woman’s family arranges a name-giving ceremony, indeeri, for the child. This is an important event in which the child is incorporated into his/her father’s lineage, the pastoral group, and the Islamic community at large. At the same time, this event also elevates the parents of the child into the status of full social adulthood. In the case of the husband, it is only with the birth of his firstborn that he gets full rights to decide the affairs of his herd, even if he has been taking care of his cattle long before becoming a father. While the indeeri of the first child is especially crucial for the parents’ new status, the births of other children are also important. Every succeeding indeeri least reinforces the adulthood status of the parents, especially so in the case of the first two or three children. As for the children themselves, indeeri is arranged for all of them in principally the same way. The only difference being that, apart from the firstborn, the ceremony takes place in the father’s camp.

The succeeding ritual, called Bantal, is performed in the natal camp of the new mother, immediately before she leaves her parents with her first child. In the ritual the mother’s new wealth, consisting of the things that have been bought with the second indirect dowry money (cede Bantiride) and gifts from relatives and friends, is

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⁹ This development is linked with a wider socio-religious change decreasing cultural elements that are considered non-Islamic among the Mbororo, see more e.g. in Burnham (1996) and Dupire (1970).

¹⁰ For a detailed discussion of these rituals in Adamaoua, see Virtanen (2003, 152–176).

¹¹ The sum is equal to 7,62 euros.
laid on the ground to be admired. The things belonging to the indirect dowry are
picked out one by one by the mother’s female relatives for approval by the male rep-
resentatives of the new father’s patrilineage. Finally, when the new mother has
moved to his husband’s camp with their first child, and settled down in the new hut
constructed for her, it is time to arrange defol (“cooking”), a ceremony that concludes
the entire first marriage procedure, and ritually marks the woman’s status as a wife
and mother of full standing. Among the most central episodes during the defol are
the admiration and praising of the new hut, furnished and decorated with the new
wealth of the wife, by other women, and the symbolic serving of the “first meal,”
prepared by the wife with the help of her friends, to the husband and his patrilineal
male relatives. It is actually after this ritual that the wife gets full rights to the milk of
the cows allotted to her by her husband.

To return to the initial question, namely the meaning of meat/milk in the ritual
sphere, there is variation in the sharing of these foodstuffs in different marriage ritu-
als. The sacrifice of cattle (kirsol) and sharing of meat to all of those present is acen-
tuated in the first rituals. The way this is done is similar in all Mbororo celebrations
in which a bull is sacrificed: men cut up the carcass, take one or both of the forelegs,
roast these over a campfire near the cattle corral, and consume that special meat
among themselves. They give the rest of the meat to the women, who cut it into
smaller pieces and prepare the meat along with rice in cooking pots. Finally, women
divide the food, the rice and the sauce with pieces of meat into portions that are fit to
be served to each age group, and to men and women respectively. Often, if there has
been enough meat, portions of raw meat are also given to departing guests to take
home. Before the common meal, it is also a customary practice to offer the people
maize or manioc gruel cooked with milk.

Towards the end of the series of marriage rituals meat gradually loses its central
relevance, and the sharing of milk takes a more dominant role. Thus, while cattle
sacrifice, usually performed by slaughtering a bull, is of the most importance in kog-
gol and indeeri, it is not expected to be performed in Bantal and defol. In Bantal, how-
ever, meat, which might consist of a slaughtered bull or a smaller portion of meat
bought from a butcher, can be served in the same manner as people serve it in differ-
ent kinds of communal gatherings if they have the means to do so.64 On the contrary,
the defol, being the ritual that most symbolizes female agency, boiled milk served
together with cooked rice and oil is the central food, while meat is totally absent.
Additionally, milk has an important role in indeeri during which the hair of the baby
is shaved with a razor blade and then thrown into a calabash filled with milk and
some leaves of a barkechi tree. The importance of this specific act for the Mbororo
identity is nicely expressed by Ndouidi Oumarou, a Mbororo man from Cameroon,
who writes in his biography that nobody can claim to belong to the Mbororo if he/
she has not been “rasé au lait,” i.e. shaved in milk (Bocquené 1986, 118). Finally a
woman, often the mother’s sister-in-law, throws the contents of the calabash onto the

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64 A bull is often sacrificed also in yearly Islamic feasts such as the feast finishing the month of Ra-
madan, as well as the feast that is arranged for the honor of a person who returns from the pilgrim-
age to Mecca. Principally, among the Mbororo, all animal sacrifices can be considered Islamic sac-
rifices, as the slaughterer is supposed to ask for God’s blessing while killing the animal.
roof of the mother’s hut, high above its doorway. When asked, my informants commented on this practice by saying, for example, that the milk-hair mixture is thrown onto the hut in order to ensure the growth of the child. In some Mbororo groups the whole calabash along with its contents is buried in the cattle corral, and still in others part of its contents are consumed by adult men (see Dupire 1962; 1970). Despite the differences between these practices, they all seem to be connected to the analogy that the pastoralists draw between the fertility of cattle and fertility of humans (cf. Hutchinson 1996, 61–62), and to the human/cattle equation in pastoral societies more generally (Hutchinson 1992, 296).

**CATTLE VERSUS SHEEP: NEGOTIATION OF PASTORAL AND ISLAMIC VALUES**

As mentioned earlier, along with Islamization, some elements of rituals, or even whole rituals themselves, that are considered non-Islamic have gradually been removed from the Mbororo culture. Along with this development, one can observe a certain decrease in the value of the cattle sacrifice. A good example of this is kaBBal, the Islamic ceremony in which a new marriage is confirmed through the distribution of cola nuts, while no animal sacrifices are performed. Another ritual that merits discussion is koggal, the gradual disappearance of which has also removed the bull sacrifice that earlier served as the first seal of the prospective marriage. It is, however, interesting to note that, although there is no religious obligation to sacrifice cattle in order to confirm a marriage, my Mbororo informants emphasized that one year before the bride’s arrival the groom’s father should sacrifice a bull. Indeed, people openly showed their moral disapproval of those parents who prefer that the groom’s family give them money or gifts instead of sacrificing an animal when marrying their daughter. Thus, it seems that, in the substitution of the bull sacrificed earlier in koggal with another bull slaughtered a year before the coming of the bride, many Mbororo still regard their cattle as the central currency in the mediation of marriages, as well as other intragroup social relations. In their own words, the use of money in these matters demeans the whole idea of marriage as “pure commerce” (coggu meer). A similar moral disapproval concerning the tendency to move to money-related transactions from the animal-related ones can be found when indirect dowry money is mentioned, which, in the Mbororo view, has nowadays reached an amount that is too large. What unites the two successive dowries discussed earlier is that they both belong to new types of money-related marriage payments, which have increased in importance, at the expense of cattle sacrifices, and together they constitute the main part of the gifts to the bride’s family. These are gifts that, in Dupire’s (1970, 29) words, have “taken the form of bride price,” and this process has occurred along with the increased sedentarization and Islamization of the pastoralists.

The conversion of the Mbororo to Islam and their appropriation of the customs of the Muslim villagers have also led to a shift from cattle to sheep sacrifices in some ritual contexts due to the more important symbolic weight given to sheep in Islamic religion.55 Perhaps the ritual that best highlights the tension inherent in this shift is

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55 One of the most important events in which sacrificing a sheep becomes a religious symbol
the name-giving ceremony, i.e. indeeri. The order commonly followed in indeeri feasts in contemporary Adamaoua is that the sheep is slaughtered early in the morning but cattle are only slaughtered after the name-giving and prayers. This order echoes what Dupire (1970, 160) observed earlier in the name-giving ceremony among the Wodaabe Fulbe of Niger, namely, the performance of separate “Muslim” and “traditional” rites. Among the Wodaabe the split can be seen in the temporal delay as the slaughtering of the sheep, considered as a Muslim sacrifice, is performed on the seventh day after the birth, while the slaughtering of cattle takes place only when the larger pastoral group gathers for their annual iworsa meeting during the wet season. In Adamaoua, where the pastoralists no longer practice these annual gatherings, the split is less evident, but it can still be discerned in the mutual order of the two sacrifices.

An interesting detail is the priority that my informants gave to the cattle sacrifice. For example, when I asked people how indeeri is performed they always spoke of the cattle sacrifice but quite often forgot to mention the sacrifice of the sheep. The same priority came up when people spoke of name-giving ceremonies in which only a sheep was slaughtered, as there were always those who complained about the absence of cattle sacrifice and said afterwards “indeeri was not performed.” Whether appropriate or not, complaints of this sort reflect the deep attachment that the Mbororo have to their traditional cattle sacrifices. Indeed, the Muslim idea that a great part of the sacrificed animal should be given as alms (sadaka) to the poor (Stenning 1959, 117) has not gained much ground among the Mbororo in Adamaoua for whom the ritual slaughtering of cattle and the distribution of the meat among those present still has more to do with the unity of the pastoral group than with any wider religious ideals. In fact, as I have discussed in more depth elsewhere (Virtanen 2007, 11), this is also the case in the Mbororo life-cycle rituals, Islamic yearly celebrations, and the cattle sacrifice that the Mbororo occasionally perform in the honor of a visiting relative, and thus it is often quite difficult in practice to differentiate between the “religious” and “pastoral” motives behind the animal sacrifices in varied situations.

DISCUSSION

For the Mbororo, the migration from Nigeria to Cameroon has resulted in a more sedentary way of life, which in turn has tied them in a closer, and more hierarchical, relationship with local Muslim chiefs and Muslims villagers in general. This rapprochement has left its traces on the Mbororo socio-religious practices, but much continuity can also be observed here. In looking at the cattle inheritance system, one can notice the persistence of the anticipated inheritance system, and the relatively small amount of animal circulation outside the lineal kin, which is partly related

among Muslims is the great sacrificial feast Eid-al-Adha (Arab.) that concludes the pilgrimage to Mecca. It is a remembrance of the event in which Ibrahim (Abraham in the Judaic-Christian tradition) planned to sacrifice his son Ismael (replacing Isaac in the Koranic version of the story). When the sacrifice is performed at home, Muslims can replace the sheep with a goat or a camel.

44 The absence of cattle sacrifice often results from the simple fact that the family organising the ritual is too poor to afford it. Thus, the Mbororo society can be understood as an unequal system, at least in the cultural sense, as the “right way” of performing rituals is out of reach of those, who do not have enough cattle to invest in animal sacrifices.
with intensified sedentarization. Another feature, especially seen in the case of animals inherited by women, is a similar combination of two conflicting principles as de Bruijn and van Dijk (1995, 321) have shown in the case of the Fulbe of Central Mali, namely a “mixture of Islamic rules (juiide) and local practice (al’aada)” of the pastoralists. Thus, whereas Islamic rules emphasize the rights of individuals, both male and female, in relation to the group, the traditional pastoralist society focuses on loyalty to the agnatic kin group. It could also be questioned whether the two systems of inheritance are commensurable at all as they are based on quite different principles.8\footnote{An interesting case concerning a similar dilemma in a different cultural context is offered by Lina\-azzat Bonate’s (2006) article on the relationship between local matrilineal and Islamic conceptions of land property and inheritance in northern Mozambique.} Whereas among the Muslim villagers, the wealth of the father is distributed only after his death, pastoralist men and women are expected to transfer their cattle to their sons and daughters as soon as these children reach their social adulthood through marriage. For the Mbororo, changing over to the system of the villagers would thus not simply mean a redefinition of gendered property, or a “softening” of the hierarchy between men and women as basic categories of people (cf. Ferguson 1985). More than that, it would radically modify the generational dynamics in their society and challenge people’s basic ideas of how social relations are constructed through cattle in the first place.

Hutchinson (1996), in her vivid monograph of the Nuer of Sudan, compares the different ways in which men and women achieve full parental status. For Nuer women, physical and social maternity are inseparable, as it is the individual fertility that is “the principal route to self-fulfilment, security, and independence.” In contrast, the procreative powers of men, as Hutchinson emphasizes, “were essentially collective” (ibid., 62). She continues:

“A man’s reproductive potential merged with that of his agnatic kinsmen through ‘the ancestral herd’, upon which he and his patrilineal relatives all drew in order to marry, bear sons, and thereby extend the patriline. Male corporate solidarity and continuity were, indeed, founded on this principle of ‘communal fertility’ through shared cattle rights.” (ibid.)

Although one central function of the Mbororo marriage rituals is to transform individuals, both male and female, into social adults, the symbolic meanings given to cattle and milk in these rituals seem to resonate with Hutchinson’s argument. As we have observed, the milk, which takes a more and more visible role towards the end of the rituals, objectifies the social transition of an individual woman. This process is culminated in the defol ceremony in which the new wealth, denoting the heightened status of the woman, is displayed in her new hut in full array. In contrast, the bulls sacrificed during koggal and indeeri rituals carry a more collective significance. In koggal the sacrifice symbolizes, in addition to a prospective marriage, a first seal between two kin groups to be later tied together into a relationship between in-laws (esiraBe). In indeeri the sacrifice of a bull, together with other ritual details (see Virtanen 2003, 160–166), transforms the child, whether male or female, from the
undefined status of newborn into a social person, that is, a member of his/her father’s patrilineage. In the case of the young men, I would even argue that it is more through the child than through cattle as such that his status is transformed, as the series of rituals in which the firstborn baby is first socially recognized and then “returns” to the father’s camp with the mother transforms the status of both parents simultaneously. In a comparable way, the ritual introduction of the new mother’s newly built hut in defol announces the transformed autonomy of both the wife and the husband, at the same time sealing their mutual dependence. On a more general level, the Mbororo tendency to sacrifice a bull and distribute its meat in celebrations of all kinds is related to the idea of collective belonging to the pastoral group/lineage, which is of equal importance to both men and women, each of who receive their share of the sacrificed beast. Here I would like to come back to Comaroff’s (1985, 72) idea of cattle as double signifiers denoting simultaneously individual identities, which can be seen in the transformations of young Mbororo into brides and grooms or newborn children into social persons, and as generalized icons of the social structure, which can be seen in the structure of a society produced and maintained through patrilineal ties.

Returning to the relationship between the Mbororo woman and milk, it should be added that during the last ten years there has been a drastic change occurring in Adamaua, as many Mbororo men, following the example of the Muslim villagers, have started to seclude their wives. This means that for an increasing number of pastoral women the selling of milk is nowadays forbidden, mostly due to the high mobility it requires. To my understanding, in conjunction with this development the using of milk in the ritual sphere has become even more important in mediating Mbororo women’s influence in their society than before.

CONCLUSION

In this article I have elaborated the socio-symbolic and gendered significance of cattle among the Mbororo cattle herders of Cameroon in two specific cultural contexts: their inheritance system and marriage rituals. I have also addressed the question of cultural change that is related to the process of sedentarization and the villagers’ pressure on the pastoralists to become “better” Muslims. In addition to different manifestations of change, the analysis has also revealed certain amount of cultural continuity as the Mbororo seek to balance between the “old” and “new” ways.

For the Mbororo, as for many other pastoral people, cattle undoubtedly form a dominant symbol in the Turnerian sense, in that they have the capacity to draw new meanings in altered situations. It is thus not surprising that cattle so easily intrude in new spheres of activity, which at a certain point in time become relevant in the social life of the people. Although, in the interconnected processes of Islamization and sedentarization the Mbororo have found new “traditional” ways to employ cattle symbolically in order to substitute the old disappearing ones, such as replacing koggal with another bull sacrifice, or complementing the sheep sacrifice in indeere with an additional cattle sacrifice, there is also much evidence of how cattle have been incor-

16 For a more detailed description of the puzzling effects that female seclusion has for the lives of both Mbororo women and men, see Virtanen 2003, 213-218.
porated into more recently adapted rituals, such as selling cattle for the purpose of going on the pilgrimage to Mecca, that give religious prestige to people performing them. In a way the pressures for change, coming from outside the pastoral group, have resulted in “re-invention” or “multivocalization” of the meaning of cattle, and thus ultimately have provided a sense of some cultural continuity as the Mbororo seek to make their lives and their place meaningful in the changing world.

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