

Review paper

Social Status of the Blacksmith in the Mberi Country in southern Chad

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ABSTRACT: The Mberi are a subgroup of the Mouroum ethnic group who live in the Department of Pendé in Logone Oriental in Chad. Within this community, we meet blacksmiths from Baguirmi who, by virtue of their status, are considered as feared and respected magicians. Their role initially consists of making tools for various economic, social, and cultural activities. The sacredness of their workshop and the

mystical origin of their know-how make them priests. Prohibitions are instituted to protect the forge and the blacksmith. The retributions obtained constitute a fairly large fortune making him a rich man within his community to which he renders countless services.

Keywords: Mberi, iron, forge, blacksmith, company

INTRODUCTION

The metallurgy of iron transformation is an ancient iron activity in Chad. It has been reported across the country by many researchers. In the Borkou region to the north, three Iron Ages can be distinguished: old, middle and recent (Claustre, 1982; Grébénart, 1988): 209-217). Witnesses to the practice of iron metallurgy have been discovered on the sao sites (Lebeuf, 1980: 16). The same is true for southern Chad (Lavachery, 2010; Tchago, 1995; Nangkara, 2015).

According to Kogongar (1971: 171), the populations of the south would have come from the Nile valley around the 17th or 18th century. Among them were the Mouroum, some of whom were Mberi and in particular blacksmiths who have settled in the Department of Pendé, in Logone Oriental. The latter put themselves at the service of society by manufacturing tools and weapons.

The blacksmiths live in the community but work in workshops which are sacred places. They are distinguished from other craftsmen by the power they wield over the iron god. Sometimes they are witch doctors or wizards, sometimes healers. However, their primary role is to provide the populations with the working

tools they need, but also with arms and money. In return for the services they render to the community, they receive rewards which constitute an important source of wealth for them. The result is an ambiguous social status of the Mberi blacksmiths. Indeed, they are both feared because they are capable of doing good as well as evil; respected and envied because of their wealth.

According to tradition, the Mberi are Mouroum from Chari Baguirmi. Before their arrival and settlement in their current ancestral village Mberi. They live, and have been seen, stayed in the locality of Tandjilé. Originally, it seems that the ancestors of the Mberi blacksmiths were also hunters and farmers. Today, their core business is found in the forge, making them key players in their communities with their expertise in transformative steel and the mystical powers they wield.

Given his social and economic role which puts him at the service of all, the blacksmith Mberi is a man who should not have enemies. He is a wise man and a resource person whom all members of the community consult to be guided in his decision-making.

The forge is a sacred place, access to which is regulated. The blacksmith occasionally makes sacrifices

there because the iron god has so decided. In the forge, the working tools are arranged in order. Their movement is controlled because there are prohibitions to respect in the forge. The forge is a place of safety; a refuge for anyone who feels is in danger.

The objective of this paper is to understand the role that this iron craftsman plays in the Mberi community, the place he occupies in Mberi community. The outline of this article is as follows: first, we will discuss the geographic context of the study and the methodology. In the second part, we looked at the origin of iron metallurgy and that of the Mberi blacksmiths. The third part of our study focus on the blacksmith and society. Finally, in the fourth part, we discussed the results obtained in the study.

Geographical context of the study and methodology

The Mberi country comprises seven (7) villages which have a total of eighteen (18) forges including twelve (12) in the village of Mberi II alone. It is the capital of the Sama canton, in the Madana sub-prefecture, Department of Pendé province of Logone Oriental. It is populated almost entirely by Mouroum.

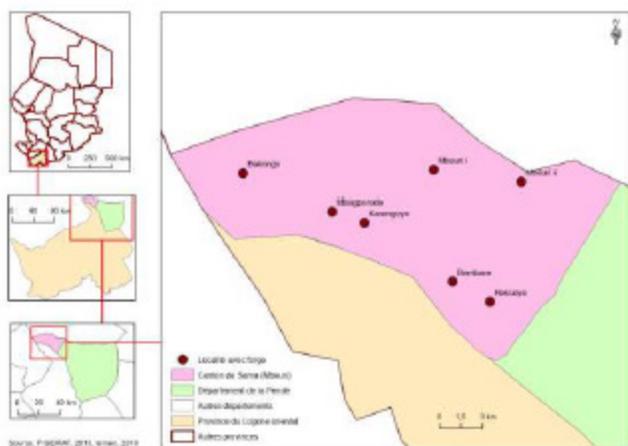


Figure n° 1 : carte de localisation des forges en pays mberi

Figure 1: Location map of forges in Mberi country.

From February 08 to 26, 2020, we carried out a search mission in the town of Mberi. The aim of the mission was to collect relevant information to understand the place of the blacksmith in society and the importance of the forge and the transformative steel industry within this community. Data were collected through a methodological approach based on oral surveys and direct observation. On this occasion, we spoke with eighteen (18) blacksmiths and visited as many forges. The questions debated with the blacksmiths focused on the role of the latter vis-à-vis society. They also interpreted the prohibitions of the forge as well as the

working tools. We had interviews with ten (10) farmers, one (1) potter, three (3) hunters, two (2) priests, four (4) tannery craftsmen, three (3) sculptors, three (3) basket makers and two (2) initiation priests for a total of twenty and eight (28) people using iron objects produced by the blacksmith. Each of them showed us their working tools and explained the importance of their activity in daily life in the community.

Origin of iron metallurgy and blacksmiths in Mberi country

The origin of iron metallurgy can be used to explain origin of the Mberi blacksmiths.

Origin of iron metallurgy in sub-Saharan Africa

Only a few decades ago that the origin of iron metallurgy in sub-Saharan Africa was the subject of debate among archaeologists. Two theories were developed: diffusionism and the local invention theories. Proponents of diffusionism believed that iron technology was transmitted to West and Central Africa through two routes: East-West and North-South. Iron technology was introduced to sub-Saharan Africa through the East-West route through Egypt either from Mesopotamia, or from Assyria or the land of the Hittites (Essomba 1992a: 403). It was the Greeks who introduced it to Egypt in the 7th century B.C. then to Napata then to Meroe. These cities became important centers of iron production. They would have transmitted their know-how on iron in West and Central Africa through Bahr El Ghazal and Lake Chad. Before the country came into contact with the Hittites around 1300 B.C., the ancient Egyptians were already working iron around 1500 B.C. (J-M. Essomba, 1992a: 403). Some authors like Mauny exclude the Meroitic or Egyptian origin of iron technology in West Africa, that is, from the Nile valley. Others suggest the trans-Saharan route from Carthage, that is, North-South. Iron would also have entered sub-Saharan Africa via the trans-Saharan route from the Mediterranean (Essomba, 1992a: 409). This path refers to two currents: the first is Carthaginian, and the second provided by the Greek counters of Cyrene. The Carthaginians traded with the interior of Africa to the countries of Lake Chad around the 3rd century BC. They would have transmitted iron technology to the shores of Lake Chad through the Berbers. Moreover, from Sirte, Greek traders also traded with the interior of Africa. Recognizing this North-South path, Paul Huard (1959: 14) wrote: the horse, the shoe and the camel were brought to the Chadian Sahara, the Mediterranean and eastern Sudan. Iron of Mediterranean origin is known in Tibesti as a currency. The scientific community has remained divided until then.

This diffusionist theory does not have convincing archaeological data. Chronologically, the Meroe dates for the early Iron Age are almost contemporaneous with

those of Nok in Nigeria, Obobogo, Nkometu, Okolo, Ndindan, southern Cameroon and that of Maonda and la Sablière in Gabon (JM Essomba, 1992a: 112). The hypothesis of a local, independent invention of iron technology in West and Central Africa is then conceivable. The results of archaeological research in recent years have made it possible to think of a possible endogenous invention of iron technology in Africa south of the Sahara. Jean Chapelle believes in this hypothesis when he writes: The invention of metallurgy did not happen at a single point, from where it would have spread across Africa. Rather, it seems that there were concomitances, concordances, a normal outcome, simultaneous or not, of techniques, of experience, of skill, of the inventiveness of men and of various chances.

Iron could have been invented autonomously in different regions of the continent. That is why J-M. Essomba writes of iron technology in the Nok culture: this could also be a local invention that was not an import phenomenon (1977: 6).

If the iron technology in the Nok culture in Nigeria is not an import phenomenon that of southern Cameroon is even less so. Oliga's site is, according to research, dated to the second millennium BCE (J-M Essomba 1992a: 220). This date makes Oliga the oldest Iron Age site compared to Meroe (6th century), Carthage (6th century) and Nok (10th century). Consequently, they cannot precede this Oliga's site in the knowledge of iron technology to the point of transmitting it to him. The dates confirm the age of the steel industry compared to Meroe and Carthage. Its endogeneity is then obvious. The origin of knowledge of iron among Mberi blacksmiths would therefore be local. What is their origin?

Origin of the Mberi blacksmiths

The Mberi are said to have their origin in Baguirmi. One of the very first Mouroum villages would be Mberi. The founder of Mberi is called Dilla, from Sig-nan, a village near Massenya, in Baguirmi. It seems that Sig-nan is the old name of Massenya. In her peregrination, Dilla would have stayed successively in Doroum, Bourédjé before settling on the site which become Mberi. The date of this migratory movement is not yet known. Other people accompanied him and built several hamlets corresponding to the clans, including the following four: Djé g Danga, Djé ge Lol, Guel bbida and Bémangra. These hamlets formed the nucleus of the expanding Mberi village. In 1963, the canton chief of Mourou Touloum, Ndimandjingar, who commanded Mberi, forced the populations to get closer to the route drawn by the colonizers going from Lai to Doba. This is how some returned to Shinda in Mouroum Touloum canton, others to Manda and then to Mberi (new) where their parents live. The new Mberi was called Mberi II and the old one,

Mberi I, seven kilometers apart, one north and the other south.

Among Dilla's companions was Bolongonne, the ancestor of all Mouroum blacksmiths. He was originally from Sig-nan in the Baguirmi region. Bolongonne had taught forge to Ndiba and Baira. His two sons had in turn taught their children, from generation to generation until our informants. When she arrived at the place that was to become Mberi, Bolongonne had set up her forge under a tree called "Lol". Her stepdaughter is said to have given birth to the twins: one was called Lol kass and the other Lol ndoul. From these two names came two hamlets which had formed the village Lol which became a district of the blacksmiths of Mberi. From this focus, the forges multiplied throughout the Mouroum country. As the requests multiply, the master blacksmith creates a workshop in the most needy village where he settles his son with his family. Customers in this village no longer come to their old supplier but now turn to the new one, happy with the shortened distance. Thus the same clan creates forges throughout the Mouroum country. These oral data, if verified, testify that the Mberi blacksmiths hold their knowledge of the Baguirmi country where their ancestors came from. They play important roles in the community where they live.

The blacksmith and society

The blacksmith is an artisan who satisfies the needs of society by making working tools, weapons and coins. He is rich and seen as a healer, a benefactor, but the same society considers him a criminal, a sorcerer.

The blacksmith Mouroum is a rich man

Among the Mouroum, a blacksmith is a rich man. His activity provides him with sufficient resources to feed himself and his family. With the income from iron, he could build up herds. Customers can exchange the product of their breeding (goat or sheep, chicken, rooster or duck) for an item made by the blacksmith. His granaries were always full (Kiethega 1996: 585). The blacksmith produces objects which he exchanges with society in cash or in kind. Tillage implements are sold more than others because of the increasing demands in this locality where the populations are mainly farmers. Another way to get the hoe is to go to the blacksmith's field to work there all day. At the end of the service rendered, the worker receives the requested tool. The interest of the blacksmith is to increase the harvests. A customer can also exchange food (millet, sorghum, peanuts, ground peas, sesame, sorrel or squash seeds) against an iron working tool made by the blacksmith. There is no standard measure but the customer brings them according to their possibilities. However, the

amount of food that goes into the preparation of the sauce (peanuts, sesame, pumpkin seeds and sorrel) is always less than that of millet, sorghum or corn.

Customers' do not just come from the blacksmith's village. Blacksmiths do not live in all Mberi villages. Customers sometimes stock up on the growing number of weekly markets these days. Blacksmiths come there from different villages as do their customers for transactions. However, repairs to certain tools such as knives, throwing knives or hoes for immediate needs are common in forges. This opportunity always provides resources for the blacksmith.

The blacksmith at the center of daily activities

The primary role of the blacksmith is to make tools to meet the needs of society. Functionally, these tools are classified into four categories: tools intended for rural, artisanal, domestic and commercial activities (Tchago, 1995: 342). By rural activities we mean: farming, hunting, gathering and fishing. While hoes, axes, adzes, sickles, and machetes are intended for agriculture, spears, arrows, daggers, throwing knives, hooks, and harpoons are used more for hunting and fishing. Fishing requires the use of harpoons and hooks. Some tools like the knife, the axe and the adze are used in the craft industry, especially in sculpture. But for the tannery, the knife, and awl are better suited. In the household, women make extensive use of the knife and axe. For other needs that require the use of money, everyone also uses the blacksmith who alone is authorized to mint it: marriage services and various transactions. There are two kinds of iron coins among the Mberi: "bbal" and "soula", which are iron bars of different lengths.



Figure 2 : deux couteaux de jeu

Figure 2: Two game knives

The blacksmith as a healer and benefactor

Many people regard the blacksmith in Mberi country as a healer and a benefactor because of the help he brings them. He treats several illnesses. To cure the ulcer, for

example, which seems to be an incurable disease, the blacksmith brings the patient under control, applies red clay paste all around his wound, and pours the burning sand from the forge hearth into it. The patient screams, cries, tortures himself, but he is subdued until the hot sand cools. The microbes in the wound are killed. The blacksmith applies the crushed leaves of the wild onion to the wound to heal the wounds. Only bandaging the wound with the wild onion is enough for the patient to recover his health. He is brought home. He thus heals many diseases such as epilepsy, various pains, mental crises, stomach aches in children, etc. For these kinds of activities, the blacksmith is seen as a healer.

He is said to be a benefactor in solving the problem of infertility. The issue of offspring is of concern to many people. This is one of the reasons why infertile couples in Mberi country almost always end up divorcing if the solution is not found. The cause of sterility does not matter: it can be natural sterility or marriage to the blacksmith's wife or to a member of his family or his clan. In the first case, the blacksmith makes sacrifices and gives products to be consumed to make the woman fertile. The blacksmith can thus promote offspring in a couple who cannot have children after several years of marriage (Coulibaly, 2006: 266). He is therefore a benefactor.

The second case concerns the divorced wife of a blacksmith, remarried to another man (blacksmith or not). She cannot give birth if she does not return to ask forgiveness from her former husband and obtain the favor of the iron god through sacrifice. Its sterility arises from the fact that before bringing the dowry, the blacksmith deposited the matrimonial service money before his god for at least twenty-four hours. He blessed her. In case of marriage breakdown, the woman remains indebted to the blacksmith whose property is protected by her god. This is why, if she remarries to another man, she will not have a child provided she has sacrifices made by a blacksmith who must be from the family or clan of her first husband; even if the new husband is a blacksmith (of course from another clan because the rival cannot be from the same family), the penalty remains the same. The wrong is given to the rival or the woman and not to the blacksmith who is seen as a benefactor. She must go to any blacksmith in Mberi (since the clan is unique and the god of the blacksmiths of Mberi is the same) for the sacrifice otherwise she will never have a child. A woman experienced a spell that was told to us by the blacksmith. The divorced wife of the blacksmith had a sacrifice made in November 2018. As a result, she gave birth in 2019 to her first child after eight years of marriage. The blacksmith, our informant, summoned the woman and her child to introduce them to us. Such successes make that the blacksmith occupies a preponderant place in the rites and the myths (de Maret, 2002: 129). He is a priest, placed between men and ancestors or the iron god whom everyone respects.

Highly respected and considered one of the village elders, we do not hesitate to entrust the blacksmith with certain tasks such as mediation. In the event of conflict between individuals, families, clans or villages, the camp that wants to make peace appoints him as mediator. This one meets the two camps. They must then comply, out of respect for the forge which remains an important sanctuary for the whole community (Coulibaly, 2006: 364). Generally, he succeeds in his mission. Thanks to him, peace returns to society. Not all of the blacksmith's actions are well appreciated. Despite the respect and consideration given to him, society sees him as a criminal.

The blacksmith seen as a criminal or a sorcerer

The blacksmith knows of nuisance products. It can harm some people who do not respect the rules of conduct vis-à-vis the forge and the blacksmith. Most of them are prohibited. Theft, for example, is prohibited in the forge. No one can steal a material good of the blacksmith because he is protected by the iron god. The thief who dares to make him suffer in stages: first he will have lower back pain, the intensity of which will increase. Its movements will be difficult. Then he will see pimples appear on the private parts of his body. His state of health will gradually deteriorate. During this time, he will have the opportunity to denounce himself, to confess his fault. If he does not, his parents will consult the seer who will determine the cause of his suffering.

If nothing is done, the blacksmith can resort to the product of the nuisance. It is a root of a shrub indicated to the blacksmith in a dream. The blacksmith takes its root, places it on the anvil and strikes it with the sacred hammer all at once while uttering incantatory words to the god of the forge to ask for assistance. If the root is cut in half, the thief will be killed within days and there is no solution. If this root is not completely cut, the thief will get sick and suffer a long time before dying. In the meantime, his parents will consult a seer who will know he can be saved at the blacksmith's; he is taken home for a ritual in order to recover his health. Generally, the thief confesses his act and one proceeds to search for the solution which leads to the expenses of the victim. The layman calls the blacksmith a witch doctor, a sorcerer.



Figure 3 : cinq marteaux sacrés (« mon »).
Figure 3: five sacred hammers ("my").

When a person is accused of theft or adultery, they are taken to the blacksmith to swear. The blacksmith makes him swear with the hammer called "my" (oblong hammer without a handle in the photo above). He places it on the ground, uttering incantatory words, and then asks the accused to swear words before stepping over it. If he really did do the deed, his life will be cut short. In this case, his parents will take the blacksmith for a criminal instead of regretting the bad behavior of their brother or son. By such roles he plays, the "my", sacred hammer, is the king of all tools.

The forge, a sacred and safe place

The status of the blacksmith was acquired thanks to the forge which is a sacred place and where sacred tools are deposited. This workshop is a safe place for people who feel they are in danger. The blacksmith, our main informant Daoulongarti Antoine testifies that no one can pursue someone, whatever the fault committed, to enter the forge. He will say nothing, he the blacksmith, but the offender will find his account the days following his act with the god of the forge. If he acts in anger, he will come back for the sacrifice. Besides, if he's Mberi, he won't because everyone knows the principle and obeys these prohibitions.



Figure 4 : une forge

Figure 4: a forge

What makes this workshop sacred is the existence of the "my" hammer and the anvils. They are sacred tools that can only be kept in this place. The blacksmith uses it to bless or curse. They are valuable tools not only for forging but also for intervening when society expresses the need.

DISCUSSION

The blacksmith is a person like any other but his status distinguishes him from others who respect and fear him. The primary role of the blacksmith is to put himself at the service of society to offer it what it desires.

When we asked Doulongarti why people respect him so greatly, he replied that it is because he provides everyone with the tools of work: the farmer, the hunter, the fisherman, the sculptor, the tanné, the potter, the basket maker and the musician. Without iron tillage implements, farmers cannot achieve satisfactory crops. Iron metallurgy allowed agricultural development (de Maret 2002: 125).

The canoe at the Mberi is woven from a large trunk of cailcedrat. In this community, only the axe can cut down the tree and carve the canoe. Before hunting was banned throughout Chad, hunting was a professional activity for many Mberi. It required appropriate instruments to be used with precise techniques.

The various tools are made in a forge, a sacred place where prohibitions must be observed, among which the one is concerning women: any woman must not enter the forge or consume the ritual meal of the forge. This is not the case with the Mberi. The tradition of the Mberi blacksmiths allows women to enter the forge to hammer or blow. This peculiarity is peculiar to the Mberi because in all of Sara's country, a woman is not allowed to forge, or to enter a forge if she is still fertile. The first measure from which she will suffer is infertility from the time of menses.

The profession of the blacksmith Mberi is envied. He occupies a place of choice in society unlike the blacksmiths of the north who are called "haddad". In northern Chad, the word "haddad" designates castes of blacksmiths, at the same time musicians, diviners, healers and hunters (Grébénart 1988: 221). "Haddad" is a local Arabic word synonymous with iron, which is understood in this context as "man occupying the lowest social rank". He is "objectified" because his whole clan belongs to a master in front of whom he must adopt a behavior of absolute submission and resignation to the point of not sitting on the same mat as himself.

Blacksmith Mberi is not cast. He is proud to report his origin or his clan to show that he is a blacksmith. The marriage system, for example, is not endogamous among the Mberi blacksmiths. The latter can marry freely to a non-blacksmith girl. This status is different from that of the Béri en Enedi, where caste blacksmiths can only marry each other (Robion-Brunner and Martinelli, 2012: 64). The blacksmiths of the Béri community and the Mberi do not have the same status: the former are cast while the latter are not. These artisans represent real authority and strength in their society (Rivallain, 2011: 239). They occupy a preponderant place in society.

Conclusion

Following their migratory movements towards the 17th or 18th century, hunters had left Baguirmi heading south to settle in the Department of Pendé where they had created the village of Mberi. Some of these migrants

were blacksmiths. The first blacksmiths passed on their knowledge to their offspring, who settled in other villages by building forges. They put themselves at the service of the society which has respect for them. They are sometimes considered as healers and benefactors, sometimes as criminals and sorcerers. In all cases, the blacksmith Mberi is at the center of economic, social and cultural activities. Being always in demand, he becomes a rich man because he receives retributions.

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