Political Structure and its Ritual Expression. The Symbolism of Initiation Rites in Two Chiefdoms

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The political structure of a society is expressed in rituals, the most impressive being the investiture and installation of the political structure's prominent actors. One has only to think of the coronation ceremonies in our contemporary kingdoms, be they European, African or from elsewhere. Installation ceremonies had the same importance in early states and they perdure in modern states with the installation into office of the highest officers. I have elsewhere (Muller 1981) argued that chiefdoms and early states are based upon a single ideological model. They both have chiefs ruling small communities in chiefdoms and bigger ones in early states. But more often than not, in early states as well as in modern states, installation ceremonies have no continuity with the rites de passage that are imposed on ordinary people. They are a thing per se, with no implication and continuity with the initiatory path followed by an ordinary citizen. A situation which might be different in many chiefdoms but not in all, the question remaining open for further research. In this contribution I shall look at the symbolism of initiation in the two chiefdoms I have studied, the Dìì of Northern Cameroon and the Rukuba of the Nigerian High Plateau. This symbolism is organized in order to show in the first place that the village chief is a man like any other who initially undergoes a normal initiation, along with all the boys of his age grade. But the political ideologies of these two ethnic groups are not only explained, but also shown and, more importantly, acted out in the rites which are made upon the chief on his investiture to this status. These rites make him the unique complete and full initiate of his chiefdom and they tell why it must be so.

THE DÌÌ[1]

The Dìì are a patrivirilocal people of around 50 000 persons. Each of the numerous Dìì chiefdoms of Adamawa (Cameroon) – which I also call villages since their inhabitants are each grouped in one single village –

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has a creation myth explaining how the chiefdom came into existence (Muller 2006a: 29–41). These myths, very short and similar to each other, fall within a category widely spread in West Africa, that of a prince from a foreign ethnic group who is wandering about on a hunt. He kills a big game animal and generously offers the meat to the autochthonous people. The typical Dìì myth states that chiefless people met a prince of another neighbouring ethnic group – most often a Mbum, a people having chieftaincies – who gave them the product of his hunt. The chiefless people are very happy and think about the best way to retain such a good provider in order to continue to benefit from him. They find nothing better than to make him their chief. They feel that after he receives such an honour, he will stay and continue to increase the well-being of the chiefless people. Indeed, the prince stays, becomes their chief and produces more well-being for his new chiefdom. These are the versions of the first Dìì chiefdoms. Later, many of these chiefdoms split into two or more similar units and, on the other hand, some neighbouring chiefless people, having seen the success of such chiefdoms, elected the richest of their men as chief, to get even more from him. But the basic scheme of chiefless people receiving benefits from a man, be it one of its own members, remains unchanged.

This myth is a partial explanation of the political structure, but there is also another explanation of this structure which we may call 'functional'. Without mentioning the myth, the socio-political structure is explained by the role the various clans play in the circumcision. This is the most important series of rites of the Dìì, and it is said that there must be a chief to organize them, an autochthonous clan to prepare and take care of the circumcision ground, a circumciser clan – which is also an autochthonous clan – and a clan of blacksmiths to forge the circumcision knives. This is valid for most Dìì chiefdoms, those of guum dialect giving the role of circumciser to a blacksmith. For the majority of the Dìì, an ideally functioning chiefdom would, then, comprise four clans, but very few follow this model. Most of them had more than one autochthonous clan at their creation and today, Dìì individuals being very mobile, the majority of the villages have people of many origins, most of them parents or affines of the original inhabitants. Moreover, a certain number of chiefdoms were created at the end of the nineteenth century with numerous clans, far exceeding the functions judged necessary for managing a circumcision (Muller 1996). In any case there is one autochthonous clan which is more deeply involved than the others in the circumcision and which I call 'autochthonous clan in charge'.

Blacksmiths are considered, in essence, as being different from the Dìì. They form an endogamous caste with many lineages, their wives being potters. Their meeting with the Dìì has several explanations, but it took place before the establishment of the chiefdoms which, if we follow their functional definition, requires that blacksmiths be already present. Some hold that the Dìì fell from the sky with a monkey like tail, while

others deny this. The blacksmiths, Nang, also fell from the sky – their very name also means 'it is raining' – and subsequently helped the Dìì become more humane by cutting off their tails. Moreover, seeing the result of a circumcision practised in the bush by baboons, the blacksmiths copied it and transmitted it to the Dìì. Other versions of the origin of circumcision state that it was a Dìì woman who saw the baboons doing circumcision. She persuaded her husband to agree to the operation, which she did alone on him. The men found the result very aesthetic and they killed the woman so that the other women would not know the details of the operation. If a woman asks, after her son's circumcision, where the foreskin is, the standard answer is that the ants gnawed it while he was sleeping on the ground during his seclusion. Apart from this class of blacksmiths, which is not here a lower caste, the Dìì are a classless people in spite of the members of the chiefly clan being called 'princes' and 'princesses', as is the usage in Northern Cameroon. The chief is – or rather was – the only man who did not work with his hands, and all the other 'princes' have to work hard because it is always a hardworking man who is elected chief. Clans are prominent in one activity or the other but none is paramount – the circumciser's clan being, however, the most influential – and a blacksmith was a special advisor to the chief.

A circumcision is held each time a chiefdom has enough boys to undergo the operation. This is a complicated matter, but the principal result is, first, to separate the boys from their mothers and, second, to make men of them through a series of sufferings, torments, beatings, and harassment, the first suffering being the circumcision itself, the others being inflicted by the boys' guardians and tormentors. These guardians are the young brothers of the boys who were circumcised a few years earlier. The period preceding the circumcision proper is a preparation for these sufferings. The boys are abundantly fed with rich food and meat to make them strong. The day before the circumcision, they are given a drink with some powdered dried foreskins from the last circumcision so that they will absorb the strength and courage of the earlier initiates. The chosen foreskins are those of the boys who were courageous and impassive during the operation. Here foreskins have a masculine connotation, contrary to the ideas of other ethnic groups which see them as a feminine part which must be eliminated to make boys complete and exclusive men. Circumcised boys are kept in special huts built in the bush, so that women will not know or guess what is going on. There is no secret divulged to the boys at this initiation. They are just warned not to tell women and non-initiated boys what has been done.

While circumcision has the separation of men from women as its first goal, it must also be done, but usually for only one boy, soon after the death of a village chief, the chief of the circumcisers, the autochthonous chief in charge, or the chief of the blacksmiths, this for prophylactic

reasons. The death of such important persons must be placated by a 'circumcision sacrifice' – as they are called. If this is not done, the spirit of the deceased will become angry and send all sorts of calamities upon the chiefdom. There must also be a circumcision at the enthronement of a new chief. If the new chief is already known or implicitly designated at the death of the preceding one, there will be only one circumcision, which will serve both to appease the late chief and install the new one. There must also be a single circumcision when the chiefdom changes its localisation and when it opens a new circumcision ground, this also to avoid catastrophic events (Muller 2002: 23–33; 2006b).

However, the circumcision required for the installation of a new chief is different and is the most interesting to analyse. On this occasion, the newly selected chief is led to the circumcision ground, with a number of boys whose parents want to benefit from the great prestige of a first circumcision presided over by a new chief, a circumcision called the 'circumcision of entry into the reign'. There, the circumciser first leads the new chief to the circumcision ground alone and recircumcises him by cutting a ring of skin just above the glans penis, explicitly to make him suffer. If the new chief seems particularly fit for the office, the circumciser may make only some deep cuts on the penis but without removing the skin. The harshness of the pain may also punish the chief for some past misdemeanour or misconduct in order to be sure that such things will never occur again. Just after having been recircumcised, the new chief introduces the boys to the place of circumcision by knocking their heads with his most important pieces of regalia, which is the role of the chief at circumcision. To follow Fortes' (1968) terminology, this re-circumcision is the proper investiture of the chief, which permits him to rule in allowing him to play his full role in the circumcision. When the boys have all been circumcised, the whole party returns to the village, the chief's body being hidden by shields made, in olden days, of elephant ears. The face of the chief must show no sign of suffering or weakness.

He then enters alone into seclusion, apart from the boys, until his wounds have healed completely. Like the boys, he suffers from torments and harassment by his guardians who are the elders of the autochthonous clans, a young but already circumcised blacksmith and a young virgin. The chief must wash with irritating water in which pieces of a type of wild onion have been put. This causes severe itching. The chief cannot scratch himself with his fingers or nails but only with a bundle of twigs, and this only with due permission from his guardians. His guardians beg him to forgive them for the torments they are inflicting by saying that by having so valiantly overcome them the chief has become the only true, complete and genuine man in the village. After all this mistreatment, he will be the only man in the village to be able to carry the weight of chieftaincy properly. His past sufferings will enable him to resist every-

thing. He will fear nothing and will evaluate situations with equanimity. He will be quiet, calm and cool, contrary to the other men who retain in their body some feminine elements: they often speak at random, like women, and are sometimes easily frightened for nothing.

The end of reclusion is performed as it is for the boys, but with some additions. Each of the boys, pretending to be mute, sits in front of his house and the members of his kith and kin come with small gifts in order to make him talk again. The chief, after having been ceremonially bathed, rubbed with oil and given brand new clothing, also sits in front of his house. In his case it is all the people of the chiefdom who come with small gifts, as if they all were his kin. It is possible to say here that the simple circumcision of boys separates them from women but not quite completely, while the re-circumcision of the chief makes him the only genuine and complete man of the chiefdom. This is, again following Fortes (*Ibid.*), the real installation ceremony in which other regalia are bestowed on the chief. Fortes states that investiture and installation can be done at the same time but they can also be held separately. Both patterns are found in chiefdoms, early states and modern states all over Africa (*Ibid.*). But this is not the end of it: within the first two to three years after his installation at home, the new chief must give a big feast to which all the neighbouring village chiefs are invited. This is a second installation to make him known and recognized regionally. The chief is now exhibited as living proof that he can provide abundance.

The recircumcision of the chief raises an important question. Why are not all boys re-circumcised to make perfect men of them? To this question, the Dìì answer that if all men were like the chief, there would simply be no chiefdom: everybody would be on his own, an absurd and unthinkable situation for life in society. The unique re-circumcision of the chief makes him the sole complete initiate of the chiefdom which, under his government, can enjoy a true civilized social life.

Again, this re-circumcision, in its technical and surgical aspects, raises another question. I have not, up to the present, been able to find another comparable case. There is, however, perhaps a way to explain this peculiarity. The chiefless Dowayo people, the immediate neighbour of the Dìì on their north-western boundary, practice an extreme form of circumcision which is also found nowhere else. They not only cut the foreskin but peel off the entire skin of the penis to eliminate all traces of feminity. This touch of feminity is said to be a certain smell of woman that remains under the skin, both of the foreskin and the skin of the penis. The Dìì practice, but only for their chief, a circumcision which is between a normal circumcision, the cutting of the foreskin, and the peeling of the entire penis done by the Dowayo. Without any doubt, we are here in the same cultural universe, these two instances being geographically close to each other and found nowhere else. It is difficult to say which has influenced

the other. Yet it is easier to bet that the Dìì have partially borrowed, for their chief only, the Dowayo surgery, than that the Dowayo borrowed the technique the Dìì use only for their chief, then amplified it and extended it to all. This argument for a borrowing from Dowayo seems all the more plausible since interpretations of the foreskin with feminine connotations seem, in spite of some notable exceptions, more widespread than the connotations of foreskin with masculinity (Muller 1993). The Dìì would simply have reinterpreted the surgical practices of the Dowayo but in giving a masculine connotation to the foreskin.

THE RUKUBA[2]

Let's move now to the Rukuba of the Nigerian High Plateau. They make up around 12 000 people grouped into some twenty chiefdoms – which I also call villages – following a ritual cycle spanning, in theory, fourteen years (Muller 1980). Unlike the Dìì, they do not have myths or stories of the origin of their chiefdoms. Several are said to have been there from the beginning, the others resulting from subsequent splits of the original ones. The Rukuba are also classless, like the Dìì, the chief working on his field like any simple farmer. The Rukuba are patrivirilocal and have a matrimonial moiety system, a village belonging to one moiety or the other or having members of both moieties. If so, the chief belongs to the majority moiety, members of the minority serving as ritual assistants. In fact, the Rukuba chiefdoms form a sort of confederacy of chiefdoms since they depend on other chiefdoms of the alternate matrimonial moiety to get wives (Muller 1976a). Two villages, one of one moiety and the other of the opposite one, have more ritual duties than the other villages. We will look at this in more detail below.

The Rukuba marriage system is rather complicated, but it must be explained first in order to understand how a chief is chosen. The chief comes from a given clan and he must ideally be the son of a preferential wife of a particular sort. Girls and boys of the same moiety, but of different sub-clans within a village, are allowed premarital relations, which form a quasi-marriage, but they must not actually marry or have any children, abortion being practiced in case of pregnancy. A girl is betrothed at the age of nine to ten to the son of her mother's last lover, who is her preferential groom, but she must not normally marry him first. Subsequent daughters are betrothed in the clan of their mother's last lover. The whole operation, that all the girls born from women of the village must be married in their mother's natal village, makes it a delayed exchange at the village level. After having had premarital relations herself, a girl should first marry a man of the opposite moiety, for an exchange of bride wealth. After a stay of one or two months with him, she is escorted to her preferential groom. She can stay permanently with him. If she does so, the preferential groom has nothing to pay. Should he marry her in her first mar-

riage, which is relatively rare, he has to pay far more in terms of bride wealth than a first husband. This means that he has to wait his turn and thus have the woman for nothing. It also implies that a woman must have, at this stage, two husbands. After one or two months, the woman may choose either to stay with her preferential groom, go back to her first husband, or even find a third one. She can also marry new husbands over the years. There is no formal divorce, and a woman can switch between her different husbands as she wishes – but from this point on she must stay with any of them for an entire year to cover the whole agricultural season.

However, the preferential husband has more rights than ordinary husbands. At the time of the *kugo* ritual (Muller 1989), which is both the end of one ritual cycle and the beginning of a new one, and which is seen as the first part of a boy's initiation, a preferential husband whose wife is with another man can ask her to return to him for one or two days. If she has a boy of about four to six years old from another father, she must bring him along with gifts. If the gifts are considered too poor, the preferential husband can retain the child temporarily until a fee is paid. However, in the two most ritually important villages and those directly depending on them, the preferential husband can permanently appropriate this child of another husband of his preferential wife. In fact, two such adopted men became chiefs in the absence of a candidate who was an actual son of a preferential husband. Maternal links are important to explain why such a man is considered the best candidate to become chief. Among the Rukuba, the chief is a scapegoat who is expelled in cases of serious trouble – drought, bad harvest, a deadly storm, locust invasion, etc. – and, as we shall see, the Rukuba treat him as a scapegoat at the end of initiation. A scapegoat has a dual status, good and bad at the same time, and the Rukuba choose a son of a preferential wife as the best candidate because he is already in an ambiguous position. He is a paternal member of his village – even when adopted – but also a uterine grandson and grand-nephew of his village. This status makes him an ambivalent citizen of his natal village. On the one hand, he has to respect a number of prohibitions regarding his village's rituals, but, on the other, these prohibitions do not apply to his uterine status. He is a sort of monster, a transgressor, in his very body. Every boy of such parentage could, in olden times, behave erratically without being punished because the status of grand-nephew allows the non-respect of the paternal prohibitions in one's own village. But these are only the premises to becoming chief: the most important transgressions will come later.

The second part of a boy's initiation is izaru, the circumcision, which has as its primal goal to diminish the intensity of the links with his matrilateral side, his mother's village and his matriline. Until this part of the initiation, the wellbeing of a small child is mostly under the supervision of his maternal uncles and of a man of his mother's natal

village who is his ultimate guardian. The circumcision severs these connections and gives the boy the right to have the same power over his future sister's sons.

The third and most important part of initiation is also, which starts with the boy's ritual marriage with a pregnant woman for one night. The boy cannot pursue his initiation before his ritual wife gives birth to a child of whom he becomes the symbolic father. Everything here is done to teach the boy the marriage rules and what marriage is really for, *i.e.* the birth of children, just before the boy can enter into premarital relations which do not give paternity rights, since, as we have seen, the birth of children is not allowed, abortion being practiced if pregnancy occurs. The child is also taught not to commit adultery with a wife of a member of his moiety, called a 'brother', in his own village. The next step of aso is to show the child the grave of a dead village chief and to tell him the importance, the 'deepness' of chieftaincy. If possible, the animal double of the chief, a slain anteater *(Orycteropus afer)*, should ideally be exhibited at that stage to show reverence to chiefs, even when they are dead (Muller 1991). If the skin of the village drum is damaged, it is also the ideal time to replace it, although this can be done at any time. This drum is the voice of the chief and of the village, his musical double (Muller 1976b). On this occasion, all the children undertaking aso and all those who have already been initiated, but who have not yet had the chance to see this replacing of the drum skin, may attend, dressed like the initiates. This will make their initiation more complete, even if it occurs years later.

A further step is to put the initiate under the power of the village ritual hut which houses the sacred calabash of the village and the exhumed skulls of ancient chiefs. A goat is consecrated to the hut by putting it against the doorstep and quickly killing it. Some of the meat is given to the child who is thus put under the power of the hut, the former chiefs and the chieftaincy.

Each initiate is then 'killed' through a chicken which represents him. The initiates give up their status as children, and all traces of femaleness are eradicated. They are made complete masculine adults and are put directly under the authority of the chief who takes charge of them by leading them out of the initiation place back to the village.

The next day is also the last day of the public ceremonies of aso. The children are shown some 'medicines' and are put under the care of the village drum which, as we have said, is the musical double of the chief. The chief and his assistants present each initiate, one after another, the sacred calabash of the village covered with leafy branches of a protective tree (Parkia sp.). This is the potentially dangerous and deadly power of the calabash. The children also sit on the same kinds of branches for more protection. The calabash is full of beer; in it is placed the skullcap of an ancient chief, which cannot be seen. In former times, the handle of the

calabash was often a radius or cubitus of a dead chief and, today, some have hanging dreadlocks of a former chief attached to the handle. The chief's assistants uncover the calabash and ask the initiate to drink. The children's fathers have told them they should refuse. They do so by vigorously shaking their head. The public part of aso is then finished. Finally, the children end up aso by learning with their fathers the farming rites punctuating the agricultural season.

The last sequence of the public part is the most significant one, but it can be interpreted only by comparing it to what happens at the nomination of a village chief. When a new chief is appointed, the ritual assistants first 'kill' the potential chief who has been selected by whistling at him through the horn of a dwarf antelope, a duiker. In this horn are inserted some remains of a former chief, a bit of his forehead skin, a morsel of his lip skin, the nail of his right thumb and the nail of his left big toe. The ritual assistants then throw the horn at him to 'catch' him. The new chief runs to his maternal uncle, to whom his future subjects come to ask for the chief back. For six days the maternal uncle refuses to send him back, but agrees on the seventh – the sacred Rukuba number. The chief goes back home, but clad only in a goatskin of the sort worn by initiates at the end of their initiation, when they refuse to drink from the sacred calabash. The Rukuba state that it is tradition that requires such attire, and some laugh when they describe the chief in the goatskin, like a little boy. However, the context clearly shows that here it is the chief, and only the chief, who now continues and completes his initiation: when the chief arrives at his village, he is given the sacred calabash containing the skullcap of one of his predecessors and, contrary to what the initiates have emphatically refused to do, he drinks out of it. The chief becomes the only complete initiate of his village. This drink makes him an ambivalent transgressor, good and bad at the same time, responsible for the well-being of the village but also responsible for any major disaster for which he will be deposed and chased away. This is the most important transgression, which is added to the chief's already being a transgressor through his ambiguous status of both agnate and uterine of his chiefdom.

In the two ritually most important villages, however, a further transgression took place at a chief's installation. A potential chief, a little baby just born of a preferential wife, was killed and the chief had to eat a little piece of the baby's flesh mixed into his food. The chief thus not only incorporated the power of his predecessors through the skullcap in the calabash but also the youth and strength of one of his possible successors, which, if everything goes smoothly, will make his reign a generation longer than expected. Even if this last rite was only performed at the two most ritually important villages, it is said to be effective for all the other village chiefs. They are also supposed to live a long life if no catastrophic event shortens their reign.

These two acts of endo-cannibalism are horrible facts for the Rukuba. They were feared by their neighbours because of their exo-cannibalism. They ate some of their neighbours, but regarded endo-cannibalism as a great transgression.

To complete any chief's investiture rites, his forehead, the edges of his lips, his right thumb and his left big toe are rubbed with red ochre. At his death, some of these remains will be inserted in the antelope horn that will be thrown at the next chief, as we have seen. From this point on the chief is subject to a light food taboo. The last part of the chief's investiture is his consecration to the ritual hut of the village. This can be seen as an installation rite. Several neighbouring village chiefs may be invited and from this moment on, the chief can begin his reign.

Great hunters who have killed an important piece of game must share the same alimentary prohibitions as those of the chief, and they are also rubbed like a chief with red ochre. Blacksmiths who, after due training, have made their first arrows on their own, also share the same food prohibitions, and they also are marked with red ochre like a chief, but this only after their death. One might consider this as a sort of initiation which puts great hunters and blacksmiths closer to the chief than ordinary men, but without equalling him since they have not drunk from the sacred calabash. Great hunters and blacksmiths can joke with the chief, but ordinary men can never do so, showing that the chief is the only complete initiate of his village. We have here a chief as the sole initiate of his village, great hunters and blacksmiths who constitute an intermediate category between the chief and ordinary men who form the third category.

CONCLUSION

In both Dìì and Rukuba societies, it is very clear that this global acted-out symbolism makes the chief an exceptional being, but one who has started out by following the same initiatory path as the other boys. The chief is intimately part of the same symbolic culture, since he follows all the same initiatory stages as his fellow-villagers. He really becomes an integral part of his society and culture by being an entire member of it. He is different from other men through only one additional rite which makes him the unique complete initiate of his chiefdom. This status of unique complete initiate has different implications in the two societies: among the Rukuba he can be deposed and chased away, since he is, with great emphasis, made into a scapegoat who has committed major transgressions; the Dìì, on the contrary, rarely depose their chiefs. They hesitate to expel a bad chief because they prefer to endure him rather than admit that they have made a bad choice. Both societies, however, agree on one thing: a great chief is one who has a long reign. But they come to this conclusion for different reasons. Among the Dìì it is because the chief is a perfect man, who by definition should live a long life; for the Rukuba, on the other hand, a long reign represents the addition of the length of a lifetime

through the ingestion of the flesh of one of the chief's potential successors if, however, his luck allows him to avoid the disasters that would bring about his deposition.

These two societies differ in their basic premises. The Dìì deny that everybody could be a perfect man like the chief, since this would mean that there could be no organized social life. They are of the same opinion as Rousseau, for whom the wellbeing of all cannot accommodate the complete wellbeing of everyone. Each has to give up some of his potentiality in order to live in society. There can be only one perfect man to administer the community. The Rukuba do not reason in the same way; they think like René Girard (1972) and make an ambiguous being – and, by definition, only one such being – their scapegoat king whom they can depose if things go awry. In both cases, true philosophical thought is the ultimate source of the creation of these two kinds of chiefdoms, and their respective philosophies are emphatically acted out in their initiation rituals.

NOTES

[1] Fieldwork among the Dìì was done over a period of twenty-seven months. Started after an exploratory survey funded by the Comité d'attribution des fonds internes de la recherche of the University of Montréal (CAFIR) in the summer of 1990, it was pursued from September 1991 to mid-January 1992, during each summer from 1992 to 1996 (grant from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada), during the summer of 1998 and the spring of 1999 (grant from the FCAR, Government of Québec). The most recent fieldwork during the summer of 2003 was funded with the help of the University of Montréal.

[2] Fieldwork among the Rukuba was undertaken between January 1964 and June 1967 when I was a director of the Bilingual Training Centre for Museum Technicians of Africa at Jos, a situation which permitted me to visit the Rukuba almost daily. I spent the whole summer of 1968 in the field with a doctoral field grant supplied by the University of Rochester, N. Y., and the months of December 1971 and January 1972 with a grant from the Canada Council.

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