

# **Conceptions of Literacy in Context**

**Situated Understandings in a Rural Area**

**of Northern Cameroon**

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**Conceptions of Literacy in Context:  
Situated Understandings in a Rural Area  
of Northern Cameroon**

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of

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Lancaster University, Department of Linguistics

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This edition of the thesis has been reformatted from the original submitted to Lancaster University in order to facilitate reading and to reduce the size and weight of the printed volume. The content has not been changed.

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# *Abstract*

## **Conceptions of Literacy in Context: Situated Understandings in a Rural Area of Northern Cameroon**

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Taking a view of literacy as a communicative practice, in which a learned skill is applied by individual people in their particular social contexts, this thesis examines the understandings of literacy of people in a village in northern Cameroon and explores how these are influenced by the circumstances of their lives.

Many developments have taken place in local life in the last fifty years as the village has become progressively integrated into a wider world. Most people are small farmers; poverty and hunger are recurrent problems. Three different languages are spoken, in different domains of life. The majority of adults describe themselves as non-literate and several literacy programmes are in operation.

Using a qualitative methodology, the researcher took part in local events and activities and noted the ways in which literacy was used in the community. He also conducted interviews with 59 literate and non-literate men and women, three of whom were interviewed in depth over several months.

He found that many people thought that literacy offered advantage and status and that it facilitated personal correspondence. It gave some people a sense of autonomy. However, learning to read and write was not a high priority in relation to the immediate pressures of survival. Religion was a significant influence on local understandings of literacy with Christians being mostly positive towards literacy. Protestants viewed literacy as useful for reading the Bible, and Catholics associated it with development. Literacy in French was seen as relevant for education and employment, literacy in the local language for religious purposes.

This study confirms the view that literacy has to be understood as situated in its local context and it reveals that people's conceptions of literacy, and not only their uses of reading and writing, need to be understood in the context of their lives.

## ***Declaration***

I confirm that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted for the award of a higher degree elsewhere.

## *Acknowledgements*

While the above declaration is entirely true, it is also true that I could not have completed this thesis without the help and support of a great many people.

The last three and a half years have been very enjoyable, but also very stretching. I am particularly grateful to my supervisor, Uta Papen, for her constant interest and encouragement throughout my studies. Her comments have always been helpful and, whenever I have approached supervisions feeling apprehensive or discouraged, I have left with renewed hope and purpose. She has put herself out a great deal for my benefit. I am grateful also to David Barton for his guidance during Uta's absence.

This study would not have been the same without the help of the Mofu people of Cameroon who shared their lives with me and allowed me to explore their understandings of literacy. My thanks are due also to my SIL colleagues in Mowo, Ken and Judy Hollingsworth, who extended an invitation to me and allowed me to live in their home while they were away.

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Above all, I am grateful to God who made it all possible.

“Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory ... throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.”

(Ephesians 3:20f)





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## *Notes*

### **References to Data**

In references to interviews and other data, e.g. PD 38: 69, the Primary Document number is followed by the paragraph number.

### **Translations from Mofu**

All quotations in French from Mofu are translations by my interpreter, Jean Claude Fandar. The translation of these into English is mine.

### **Currency Conversion**

For the conversion of monetary sums, an exchange rate of 1,000 francs CFA to £1.06 sterling has been used.

## *Abbreviations*

<b>Acronym</b>	<b>Full Name (French)</b>	<b>Full Name (English)</b>
CALMO	Comité d'Alphabétisation en Langue Mofu-Gudur	Mofu-Gudur Language Development Committee
CDD	Comité Diocésain de Développement	Diocesan Development Committee
CROPSEC	Conseil Régional des Organisations Paysannes de la Partie Septentrionale du Cameroun	Regional Council of Farmers Organisations in Northern Cameroon
GIC	Groupe d'Intérêt Commun	Common Interest Group
NGO		Non-Governmental Organisation
PNA	Programme Nationale d'Alphabétisation	National Literacy Programme
REFLECT		Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques
SAILD	Service d'Appui aux Initiatives Locales de Développement	Local Development Initiatives Support Service
SODECOTON	Société de Développement du Coton	Cotton Development Company
UNDP		United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO		United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation





# 1. The Purpose and Approach of this Study

This thesis concerns the place and meaning of literacy in the lives of a community of people living in northern Cameroon. It focuses on how their understandings of literacy are conditioned by the particular circumstances in which they live and by their present and past experiences of literacy. It also discusses the implications of their understandings for the local adult literacy programmes functioning in their area.

Adult literacy in developing countries<sup>1</sup>, the broad topic of this research, has received a considerable amount of attention in international policy circles in recent years. Literacy is seen as being associated with development, particularly of an economic kind, and although the relationship is open to considerable debate (Canieso-Doronila 1996, Lewin 1993), major international agencies and development NGOs are committed to supporting efforts to increase literacy rates around the world. In the view of UNESCO, adult literacy and basic education programmes serve an important purpose in enabling people to become literate:

Being literate adds value to a person's life. Literacy can be instrumental in the pursuit of development – at personal, family and community levels, as well as at macro-levels of nations, regions and the world. (UNESCO 2006: 30)

In order not to over-emphasise the effects of literacy, the same report wisely adds an important word of caution and realism:

...literacy per se is not the sole solution to social ills such as poverty, malnutrition and unemployment, though it is one factor in helping to overcome them. (UNESCO 2006: 31)

In spite of this note of caution, international support for efforts to promote literacy in developing countries has seen a considerable increase in recent years, particularly as part of renewed efforts at the turn of the new millennium to assist countries where official literacy rates are low. As part of the Education for All initiative, an improvement by 50% in adult literacy rates by 2015 was established as a target at the World Education Forum in 2000, and the United Nations General Assembly subsequently declared a Decade of Literacy from 2003 to 2012 in order to give further support to efforts to improve literacy competencies around the world. Although adult literacy was not listed explicitly in the Millennium Development Goals adopted by the United Nations in 2000, the contribution which it can make to one of the eight goals, that of universal primary education, has been acknowledged (UN 2000, UN 2001, UNESCO 2000).

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<sup>1</sup> It is not easy to find a satisfactory terminology to differentiate countries from one another in this discussion as the changing popularity of various terms indicates. "First/Third World" has fallen out of use and "North/South" now has some currency, at least for the time being. My intention here is to draw a distinction between those countries which are regarded as being in need of international assistance for their development, and those which are generally the suppliers of that assistance.

These policy initiatives are to be welcomed but the link between literacy and development remains highly contested, as I will discuss below (see page 14). Nevertheless, literacy has considerable importance at the individual level as numerous reports from people who have learned to read and write as adults attest. As one learner in Uganda said, “Literacy has taught us to know our problems... and that we can solve some of them.” (Archer and Newman 2003: 268) Another in Brazil commented, “I talk more with people. I’m happier...I have confidence.” (Bartlett in press) Irrespective of whatever contribution literacy may make to development at a national level, there is little doubt that literacy can make a significant difference to important aspects of the lives of individual people (Lauglo 2001).

### ***1.a Literacy – a Personal and Professional Interest***

My own engagement with literacy in development began over 20 years ago when I began work in Cameroon as a literacy specialist with SIL, an international NGO focusing on the development of the lesser known or “minority” languages of the world (see [www.sil.org](http://www.sil.org)). It is a linguistic organisation which promotes these languages through producing literature and organising basic education programmes. Since these languages typically do not have a written tradition, development commonly begins with working with the speakers of these languages to devise an appropriate writing system, leading to the publication of literature and training in translation and other aspects of language development. Literacy work with adults and children plays a prominent role in this activity. By definition, given the particular focus of SIL work, the speakers of these languages are not literate in their own language since they have not previously been written down, but commonly they are also non-literate in any other language. Thus, literacy work can fulfil an important educational function in these contexts. As a faith-based organisation, all of whose members are Christians, SIL often facilitates the translation of the Bible or parts of the Bible into the local language.

I lived in Cameroon with my wife and children for ten years, working first with one particular language community to assist them in training literacy teachers and to produce reading materials. Subsequently, we moved to the north of the country where my role was primarily administrative but it allowed me to continue to be a trainer of literacy teachers and programme personnel. Since returning to the UK in 1999, I have been working at the SIL training centre, involved in preparing staff to take up literacy assignments around the world. The research which I report in this thesis has enabled me to supplement my practical experience with a much greater understanding of the theoretical basis of literacy work and it has made an important contribution to my expertise as a literacy specialist and trainer.

### ***1.b The Challenges of Literacy Work***

It does not take much exposure to literacy work in developing countries to realise that such work is faced with many challenges. Resources are often limited, non-literate adults are often lukewarm towards participating in learning opportunities, and many who begin a period of literacy instruction fail to complete it (Abadzi 2003). The progress of those who attend classes is often extremely slow and the retention by learners of what they have

learned is a major difficulty<sup>2</sup>. Those who do complete a literacy course often lose what they have learned unless they have a very thorough grounding. Comings (1995) suggests that a minimum of 200 hours of instruction is needed over the course of a year to avoid the problem of loss of skills.

A further challenge faced by literacy programmes in many developing countries is that there is little opportunity for literate adults to make use of literacy because of the low literacy environment in which they live. Literate environments are social contexts, such as the home and the wider community, in which written documents and written communication are common (UNESCO 2006). The quality of the literate environment is important because it has an impact on how people learn and practise literacy. In principle, people who have learned to read and write may become literate individuals through their interaction with their literate environment, and, over the course of time, the communities of which they are members become literate societies through their own interaction with their wider context (Olson and Torrance 2001). In many cases, however, the local context can be described as one of “incipient” literacy (Besnier 1995) where literacy has not been practised for an extended period of time and its use has not permeated throughout the community. This raises questions as to the conditions under which the context of the learners can be expected to help them develop greater competence in literacy use.

### ***1.c The Relevance of this Study***

One question which arises from the above discussion is how to maximise the effectiveness of literacy programmes in the midst of all these challenges. Amongst the multiplicity of possible responses, I have chosen to begin from the assumption that adult literacy programmes should understand the particular situations, understandings and goals of their learners so that they are better placed to provide instruction which the learners feel is appropriate for them and which meets their particular aims in learning. This assumption is supported by adult learning theory (Knowles *et al.* 2005, Rogers 2002, Rogers 2003a) which argues that adults have clear goals when they take part in any learning opportunity and that they participate only if, and for as long as, they can see their goals being met. Put bluntly, learning programmes for adults need to be clear about the expectations of their learners, otherwise the learners will no longer attend. This is also the view of Street, who states,

If we do address what literacy and development mean to those for whom the programmes have been designed, then those programmes ... might stand a better chance of success. (2001a: 95)

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<sup>2</sup> The terminology of adult literacy programmes is contested. Various terms are used of people who are engaged in literacy learning in literacy programmes, such as “participant” or “student”, but I have decided to describe them as “learners”. I regard this as a neutral term. No particular view of the nature of the learning which they are engaged in or of their degree of agency in relation to the content and implementation of the programme should be inferred from this choice. I also use the term “teacher” in the same way.

This raises the issue of what literacy programme organisers can do to understand better the learners whom they are trying to serve. In response, this thesis demonstrates how detailed research can reveal what people think about literacy. Research into the needs of local populations has risked being superficial and limited to rapid investigation from outside; it has tended to focus on what people do with literacy rather than what they think about it (Papen 2005a). Such research is somewhat easier to carry out, as it does not necessarily involve lengthy interaction with the people concerned, but it risks failing to uncover important information.

In order to give a brief introduction into my perspective on literacy, which I will elaborate in the next chapter (Section 2f), I take the view that literacy is more than a transferable skill with universal application which involves people associating the sounds of their language with particular symbols so that they can decode written text and encode into a written form what they want to say. It is therefore more than what was expressed many years ago by one of the pioneers of literacy in minority language communities:

That person is literate who, in language that he speaks, can read and understand anything he would have understood if it had been spoken to him, and who can write, so that it can be read, anything that he can say. (Gudschinsky 1973: 5)

Such a definition runs the risk of limiting the concept of literacy exclusively to the mastery of certain skills.

A similar definition was used by UNESCO soon after the Second World War.

“[A literate person can] both read with understanding and write a short simple statement on his everyday life.” (quoted in Staiger 1969: 282)

This was elaborated a few years later to the following:

“A person is literate when he has acquired the essential knowledge and skills which enable him to engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning in his group and community, and whose attainments in reading, writing and arithmetic make it possible for him to continue to use these skills towards his own and the community's development.” (ibid.)

Both definitions see literacy as essentially a matter of a skill, even if the latter definition lays emphasis on the application of literacy for personal and community development.

Another way of looking at literacy is to see it as “a social activity” (Barton 2007: 34), which is practised across communities of people and which has particular functions and meanings for them. It is a communicative practice which involves the use of language in written form. It is characterised by diversity since its expression varies from one context to another, one community to another, and even from one person to another. In this sense, it is “situated” (Barton *et al.* 2000), meaning that it not only occurs at particular times and

places but also that it is defined by these particular contexts. It is this relationship between literacy and its context which makes “situated” a more appropriate term than simply “located”.

This view, known as the New Literacy Studies, has become established in literacy studies in the last 25 years (Barton 2007, Gee 2000, Street 1993a). While the main thrust of its attention has been directed at uncovering the multiplicity inherent in literacy in practice, it readily raises implications for educational programmes which are directed at teaching literacy skills to children or adults; it particularly challenges the traditional view that literacy is nothing more than a skill with universal application which can be taught to all learners irrespective of age, gender and context. It is a view which brings new and valuable insights with benefit for programmes and learners alike. It is out of an eagerness to explore these insights in relation to literacy programmes which are based on other perspectives of literacy that I have undertaken this research.

In this study, I use the social practice view to focus particularly on literacy as it is experienced and understood by people in one community in Cameroon. I have tried to understand literacy from their point of view as people living in a particular place with its own historical, cultural, social and economic features, and to draw out the implications of my findings for the literacy programmes operating in the area. I take the view that this is an important enterprise with a valuable contribution to make towards the effective implementation of literacy teaching in Cameroon and elsewhere.

### ***1.d A Distinctive Focus***

In taking the above topic for my research, I share the interest of a number of other researchers who have conducted studies in different places around the world (see below), and who have likewise adopted a social practice view of literacy, discussing its application to literacy learning provision. However, my approach is not entirely the same as theirs in two respects.

Firstly, my research site can be characterised as an area where literacy is a relatively recent innovation and is not a well-established form of communication throughout the community. My research took place in a rural area where the majority of the population describe themselves as non-literate. The contextual features of my research site are therefore very different from recent studies such as those in the industrialised and urban context of the UK (Barton and Hamilton 1998, Barton *et al.* 2007), or in urban situations in developing countries (Rogers 2005a). In my research site, many people consider themselves to be poor, a view which has a bearing on their understandings of literacy, as I will demonstrate. I will consider the nature of poverty in Section 1e.

Secondly, my focus is on the community as a whole so that my field of vision is somewhat broader than that of other studies in which attention has been centred firmly on the literacy programmes and the learners within them (such as Gfeller 1997, Ghose 2001, Kalman 2005, Kell 1996, Millican 2004, Papen 2001, 2005b, Puchner 2003, Robinson-Pant 2000, 2001a). My interest is primarily in the views of members of the wider community, although I will include the views of people who are engaged in literacy learning when these are relevant.

In spite of this broad field of view, I am able to make a more direct application to existing literacy provision than, for instance, Dyer and Choksi (1998) who conducted research in a community in India where only the first tentative steps were being made to establish a literacy programme, and McEwan and Malan (1996) who researched the understandings of literacy in a rural part of South Africa with a view to highlighting issues to be addressed by prospective literacy provision. My approach is thus to make a link between the wider community and specific existing adult literacy programmes using the social view of literacy as a bridge. This enables lessons to be drawn regarding the content, methodology and form of provision of these particular programmes.

My research is similar to that of Betts (2003) who explored how people in a rural community in El Salvador engaged with literacy in a context where there was little interest in the locally available literacy learning provision. She concluded that the literacy programme misjudged the needs of the local population who had developed their own strategies for meeting their literacy needs, and that those who participated in literacy learning did so for their own purposes which differed from those of the programme. She argued for a greater understanding by literacy programme organisers of the learners and potential learners. I consider, however, that she hardly touches on the operational implications of her research for the particular programme in question. Likewise, the research by Malan in a district of Cape Town in South Africa (Malan 1996a), Robinson-Pant in Nepal (2000, 2001a) and Magalhães in Brazil (1995) all explore the dynamics of the relationship between the literacy practices of learners and local literacy provision but their published accounts could go further in bringing out the practical implications for the programmes.

I therefore aim to address the following specific questions as they concern one particular community in Cameroon:

1. What understandings of literacy are held by local people? This includes further questions such as: What instrumental or other purposes do they believe it serves for them? What symbolic importance do they attach to it?
2. How are people's understandings linked with their particular social and socio-economic context and how are they formed?
3. How far does the locally available literacy provision take these understandings into account?

In the next chapter, I discuss the theoretical foundations of my research and explain my understanding of literacy as learned skill applied in a social context. In Chapter 3, I explain how I carried out this research and discuss a number of methodological issues which arose.

This thesis involves discussion of the relationship between the meanings of literacy for a particular group of people and the context in which they live. Accordingly, I focus on the context in Chapters 4 and 5 and on the people in the village in Chapters 6 and 7.

In Chapter 4, I describe the village and the main features of the way of life for its inhabitants. I emphasise how different is life for them now compared with 100, 50, or even 25

years ago. New institutions have been established, especially the school and the church, which have had a major impact on local life. Whereas once the links between the village and outside extended only to its immediate region, the village is now connected by political, economic, religious and even sporting ties to the whole country of Cameroon, to Europe and America, and beyond. This widening world has an impact on local uses and understandings of literacy.

Chapter 5 focuses on the language dimension of the village context as I discuss communication, both oral and literate. As in any other part of Cameroon, several languages are in common use, each in particular domains and serving different purposes. This is relevant for a study of views of literacy since literacy involves language in written form, so accounts of literacy in multilingual situations have to specify the language in which reading and writing are taking place. I will demonstrate that local meanings of literacy are closely associated with the various attitudes which people have towards the languages in local use and that an explanation of how people understand literacy has to take the multilingual nature of the area into account.

The following two chapters concern individual people in the area. In Chapter 6, I focus on the three people who were my main informants. Through visiting them on several occasions each, I became well acquainted with their lives and their views of literacy. I identify their understandings of literacy and show how these make sense in the particular context in which they live. In Chapter 7, I examine the views of literacy of people across the community, some of whom were literate and others were not. All regarded literacy as a significant feature distinguishing those who were literate from those who were non-literate, but there was also some variation. Non-literate people felt somewhat disadvantaged, even if many of them took the view that there was little which they could do to change this. Literate people felt that literacy was important for them in various ways. The metaphors they used suggested that for them literacy represented modernity.

In Chapter 8, I discuss further the link between local views of literacy and the context of people's lives. In particular, I show the effect of the major institutions which have become established in the village. I argue that religion, education and agriculture serve as "sponsors" of literacy (Brandt 1998, 2001), each influencing in its own way the meaning which literacy has for the local people who interact with them. The multilingual nature of the area is particularly relevant at this point since each of these sponsors favours the use of one or more particular languages over others.

In Chapter 9, I draw out the practical implications of my study for the adult literacy programmes in the area. I suggest that these programmes could do more to respond to the particular views of literacy of local people and I propose a number of ways in which they might do so, and in the process become more effective in helping their learners to acquire greater literacy competencies.

In the final chapter, I present an overview of my findings and discuss their contribution to the theory of literacy as a social practice. I also address several issues arising from my

research, including how my study could have been improved and what further research could be conducted in this context or elsewhere.

### ***1.e The Nature of Poverty***

At various points in this thesis, I draw attention to the poverty of the people with whom I interacted, an issue which was of considerable importance to them (see, for instance, the comments of my main informants on pages 92, 103 and 111). A full discussion of the nature of poverty lies outside the scope of this thesis but I would agree with Sen (1999) who argues convincingly that poverty should be seen, not simply as a lack of economic opportunity, but more broadly as the lack of freedom or capability which a person has “to lead the kind of life which he or she has reason to value” (op. cit.: 87). He holds that development should be seen holistically as aiming to promote not only economic prosperity but also political freedom, transparent governance, and social provision including health, education, and a welfare safety net, all of which work together to contribute to human development. It could certainly be argued that the people in my research are lacking, not only material well-being but, to some degree, these other “freedoms” as well.

Nussbaum (2000) has taken up the capabilities approach to draw particular attention to the lack of capability experienced by women. She argues from a more philosophical basis than Sen that international politics and development planning should pay greater attention to issues of gender.

Adult literacy has a role in enhancing human capability, as has been discussed by UNESCO (2003). Further fruitful research could be conducted in the Mofu area from this perspective, for instance to explore the extent to which literacy influences the capabilities of local people.

Before proceeding further, I will outline briefly the national setting of this research. This will introduce some of the themes which I will discuss in greater detail in later chapters.

### ***1.f Cameroon – the National Context***

Cameroon is a modern creation, its borders having been created only over the last 100 years as a result of the intervention in Africa of the European powers and the agreements which they made between themselves to establish their own areas of interest (see Map 1, page 183).

The coastal area had contact with Europeans as early as the 15th century when Portuguese traders arrived. Over time, they were displaced by traders from Holland, Britain, France and other countries who bought slaves, palm oil and ivory (DeLancey and DeLancey 1999, Le Vine 1964, Le Vine 1971).

Towards the end of the 19th century, as competition grew between the countries of Europe for greater influence in Africa, the chiefs of the coastal town of Douala, where much of the trade was centred, approached the British government to establish a protectorate over the area. However, receiving little response, in 1884 they signed an agreement instead with a representative of the German government, thereby making Germany the



first colonial power. It was from that time that Europeans began to settle in the country outside of the trading centres on the coast. It took time, however, for Germany to establish its authority inland and it was not until 1911, after a long process involving both negotiation and force, that its control was established up to Lake Chad in the north of the country.

Following the defeat of Germany in the First World War, the territory was given to Britain and France under a League of Nations mandate, with France taking four fifths of the area and Britain two separate elongated strips on the western side which were administered in conjunction with its Nigerian territories. These arrangements continued after the Second World War under trusteeships from the United Nations.

In 1960, French Cameroon became independent. It was joined in the following year by the southern part of what had been under British control, thereby forming the Federal Republic of Cameroon. This became a unified republic with a single government and administration in 1972. The country has been led by only two Presidents, Amadou Ahidjo until 1982, and Paul Biya to the present time. France has continued to maintain an active relationship with Cameroon whose government and administration owe much to the French model. Economically, Cameroonian stability has been assured by the Cameroonian currency being tied to the French franc and more recently to the euro.

The population amounts to some 18 million people, just over half of whom live in the urban centres in the southern and western parts of the country. The two largest of these are Douala, the main port and economic capital, and Yaoundé, the administrative and political capital. Many people from other parts of the country live and work in these cities for shorter or longer periods of time. The rate of urbanisation is increasing and it is projected that by 2015 more than 60% of the population will live in urban areas (UNDP 2007).

Cameroon is known for its diversity, not least in its ethnic composition. Some 286 distinct language groups have been identified, with numbers of speakers ranging from more than two million down to a handful. These languages are related to larger families of languages which are spoken widely across Africa, suggesting that the present inhabitants of Cameroon can trace their origins through migration to many different parts of the continent (Gordon 2005). For purposes of government, education and administration, French and English are recognised as official languages. Many Cameroonians speak more than one language to some degree, although their proficiency varies widely.

Cameroon's diversity has a geographical dimension as the country can be divided into four distinct climatic zones. The south is largely covered by dense tropical jungle where the climate is constantly humid. In the west, a range of high mountains provides a much cooler climate. In the centre of the country, there is a thinly inhabited high plateau with lower temperatures and rainfall. Further north, the land drops to a low-lying sandy plain where the climate is dry and temperatures often exceed 40 degrees, with slightly lower temperatures in the mountains on the western side.

These variations allow a wide range of different produce to be grown although distribution and marketing are difficult as the transport infrastructure is not well developed. There

is one single-track railway line extending from Douala only as far as Ngaoundéré, little more than half way to the northern extremity of the country, and it is not possible to travel on surfaced roads from one end of the country to the other. Improvement is taking place, but slowly.

Economically, Cameroon is classified by the United Nations Development Programme as a country of Medium Human Development, based on a combination of indices relating to life expectancy, adult literacy rate, school enrolment and Gross Domestic Product (UNDP 2007). On this scale, it ranks at 144th out of 177 countries, and at 12th among the countries of sub-Saharan Africa. Most of its economy is founded on the export of oil from offshore oil fields and raw materials such as timber, cocoa, coffee and cotton. After an economic crisis in the early 1990s which resulted in the devaluation of the currency by 100%, the economy is now making a gradual recovery. However, the reputation of the country for corruption in many areas of public and economic life has attracted international attention and has undermined economic growth (Marquardt 2006, OECD 2006).

Having thus set the personal and national context of my research, I will now turn to discussing the theoretical framework of my study.

## 2. Towards an Understanding of Literacy

In this chapter, I will discuss the theoretical foundations of my research with particular attention to the view of literacy as a social practice which largely informs my research. I will distinguish this view from other ways in which literacy is understood and consider its strengths and weaknesses as an approach. I will then explain my own theoretical position which sees literacy as possessing both individual and social attributes and as the application of learned skills by individual people in particular social contexts.

The view of literacy as a social practice is distinct from other views of literacy in that it focuses on examining the ways in which literacy is used by particular groups of people and communities (Barton 2007, Barton and Hamilton 1998, Gee 1996, Knobel and Lankshear 2007, Lankshear and Knobel 2006, Street 1984, 1993b, 2005). It highlights the variability and socially contingent nature of this means of communication and provides a lens by which the reality of how people use literacy in practice can be examined. In so doing, it challenges generalised assertions about literacy and its inherent characteristics.

It is a newcomer in the world of literacy studies as it has developed only in the last 25 years, its source being located in the work of Heath (1983) and especially Street (1984). In accounting for its origin, reference has to be made to the fact that it is only one expression of a “social turn” in a number of areas of study away from an exclusive focus on the individual towards the social context of which the individual is part and with which he or she interacts (Gee 2000). It marks a late 20th century rejection of positivist certainties in favour of the more relativistic stance favoured by post-structuralism. It has now achieved an established position in theoretical discussions of literacy and has begun to exert an influence in literacy agendas internationally, as recent publications from UNESCO have demonstrated (UNESCO 2004, UNESCO 2006). Theorists who have not previously taken this view of literacy into account have begun to recognise the validity of this perspective and incorporate it into their work (Olson 1994, Olson and Torrance 2001).

Before discussing the social view of literacy in detail, I will first outline some related views. These are relevant to this discussion as it is somewhat in reaction to them that the social practice view has developed. They also contain important elements which I will incorporate into the definition of literacy on which I have based my research.

In presenting this overview, I follow in the steps of others who have drawn a similar distinction between the social practice view of literacy and the view of literacy as a skill (Rassool 1999, Street and Lefstein 2007). Some of these discuss the range of metaphors which are used in relation to illiteracy, such as sickness, oppression or ignorance (Barton 2007, Searle 1999). Like them, I draw attention to the debate over whether literacy has consequences and whether these are the product of the inherent characteristics of literacy itself or of the particular local conditions and circumstances in which literacy is located. At the present time, no consensus exists on the precise nature of literacy, and “plurality” continues to be a concept which is appropriately applied to the ways in which literacy is understood as much as to how it is practised (UNESCO 2004, Wagner 2001).

## ***2.a Literacy as Reading and Writing***

I will begin with what may be regarded as the traditional and standard view of literacy. It has a long history and it is commonly held both in the field of education and in popular discourse. This view equates literacy closely with reading and writing and sees it as a skill which is learned through a process of instruction usually focused on children and taking place within formal education; this skill is considered to be transferable to any situation involving reading and writing (Beard 1993, DFID 2000, Papen 2005c, Rassool 1999). Like speaking, hearing or seeing, literacy is regarded as a capability, or potential ability, of all human beings and as universal and value-free.

This view understands the skill of literacy to operate in the act of reading when the individual looks at graphic signs of various kinds and interprets their meaning, often by associating them with the sounds of spoken language to identify the words which they represent. A similar mental process occurs in the act of writing when meaning is inscribed in some way. It is a psycholinguistic activity in which the mind processes language in written and oral form (Goodman 1973). This perspective leads to research which is conducted in an experimental manner to understand better what is involved in reading, with the aim of identifying methods of helping people, especially children, to become readers or to overcome reading difficulties (Barr 1991, Kamil 2000, Pearson 1984).

Various theoretical models of reading have been developed which have given rise to considerable debate in educational circles over the most useful techniques for teaching people to read. Some, such as Adams (1994), argue that teaching reading is essentially a matter of helping learners to be aware of the sounds of their language and how these are represented by letters. This is known as the “phonics” approach. Others, such as Smith (1988), take a “whole language” approach, arguing that the reading process is less easily prescribed and that readers obtain meaning not by decoding letters and then, in a sequential manner, the words which they compose but by processing larger units of texts, especially whole words, which they do by visual, semantic and contextual means. These debates have become all the more heated as they have a bearing on educational policy and on the profits of the educational publishing industry which produces the books officially approved for use in schools.

The skills perspective assumes that literacy is measurable and that it is therefore possible to classify people according to whether or not they possess the skill of reading and writing, and, in the case of older children and adults who have passed the age when the skills of literacy are usually taught, to describe them as literate or illiterate. It is an approach which is conducive to surveys aiming to establish the literacy rate of particular groups or national populations. Such statistics are a powerful instrument in arguments over the allocation of resources to education systems and programmes in all countries but they are very crude constructs not least because they tend to ignore the degree of mastery of the skill of literacy which people possess and also the degree to which they are able to make use of literacy in their lives.

These weaknesses were addressed to some extent in the International Adult Literacy Survey conducted in a number of industrialised countries in 1994. It attempted to approach

literacy in a more nuanced manner by using a five-level scale to assess competence in understanding text, making use of forms and documents, and using basic arithmetic for everyday purposes (OECD and Human Resources Development Canada 1997, OECD and Statistics Canada 1995, 2000). Nevertheless, it remained tied to a universalist view of literacy as a skill and consequently failed to give adequate attention to the influence of context on local uses and understandings of literacy (Hamilton and Barton 2000).

I consider that it is essential to move away from an over-generalised view of literacy and to provide a detailed account as reading and writing are complex activities and not all people are equally competent in the diverse contexts in which they are used. At a basic level, some who have been to school or attended a course of literacy instruction are unable to make use of reading and writing, while others who have not had formal instruction nevertheless have some degree of competence acquired in other ways. Equally, the skills view fails to take account of people who know how to read and write but who feel unable to make use of reading and writing to meet the literacy demands placed upon them in their social environment. It is therefore preferable to think in terms of a continuum of literacy-illiteracy than a simple dichotomy between the two (Tabouret-Keller *et al.* 1997).

The skills view typically conceptualises literacy as the engagement of the person with a text. Literacy is seen as a learned skill which is transferable and able to be used unproblematically in any activity which demands reading and writing (see also Gudschinsky 1973). This view is far removed from that of literacy as a social practice but I will return to it later in this chapter as it contains elements which are applicable to this research, especially in its focus on the individual dimension of literacy.

## ***2.b Literacy as an Agent of Individual and Social Change***

Another view sees literacy as a medium of communication which brings change to individuals and to societies where it is practised. Accordingly, psychologists and sociologists have identified a difference between literacy as written communication and communication that is oral, going so far as to suggest that literacy leads to a fundamental cognitive change, enabling people to think in a more abstract and logical manner. They base this view on the belief that writing is a more structured form of language than speaking and that it thus possesses inherent properties which enable people to order their world in a more structured manner than is possible with speech alone (Ong 1982, 1992). Psychological research by Luria in Russia in the 1930s (Luria 1976) pointed to literacy as a cause for the development of abstract thinking skills. However, Luria was not able to distinguish the effect of literacy from the effect of schooling; this was achieved successfully through research in Liberia by Scribner and Cole (1981) who established that such changes in the way people think are not the product of literacy in itself but rather the result of schooling and the particular uses of literacy which schooling teaches.

If literacy is thought to change individual ways of thinking, it is only a small step to extend this argument to entire communities. Accordingly, this view holds that a clear difference, sometimes referred to as a “great divide”, exists between societies where oral communication predominates and those where literate communication is ascendant (Olson and Torrance 1991, Ong 1982). Oral societies are considered to be generally

conservative and community minded, whereas literate societies are more progressive and individualistic.

If literacy is an agent of change in the individual, it can also bring change in communities. This raises questions in the field of social history for it could be argued that societies in which literacy is well established have an edge over societies where it is not. Goody and Watt (1968) suggested that the growth of literacy in ancient Greece, which they attributed to the simplicity of the alphabetic system of writing, accounted for the intellectual development of that culture and to the growth of critical thinking and rationality which can be traced back to that time. They considered that literacy made possible the keeping of historical records which, through being placed in apposition to the more fallible record of human memory, created an awareness that history and myth are quite distinct. It provided material for analysis and promoted critical thinking. Goody and Watt also argued that widespread literacy in ancient Greece contributed to the development of bureaucratic institutions and to the growth of democracy, since literacy made it possible for laws to be recorded in writing and available for citizens to read.

Goody and Watt express their views in terms of tentative hypotheses but their conviction about the value and superiority of literacy is clear, as Street (1984) pointed out. Their argument is weak in that they start from an assumption that literacy is associated with rationality and that literate societies are superior to non-literate ones. They then find an explanation for this in the form of communication which they regard as the main feature distinguishing these types of community. Ultimately, their argument is unprovable and based on the circumstantial occurrence of a particular form of writing with the appearance of particular forms of philosophical thought and political organisation. They display a cultural bias, privileging western rational modes of thought over other cultural ways of thinking, alphabetic writing over other forms of graphic representation, and democratic political systems over other kinds of polity.

The insufficiency of their argument has been amply demonstrated. For instance, literacy did not bring about social development in Sweden during the 18th and 19th centuries, even though a large proportion of men and women were literate. The policies of the Lutheran Church and the state required young people to be able to read before they could be confirmed but literacy was applied only in the religious domain for the purpose of individual piety and it involved reading rather than writing. Children were taught to read by their parents at home and they did not come under the influence of state education which might have led to social change or development (Johansson 1981).

Similarly, in Canada, records from Halifax in the 19th century demonstrate that literacy was not associated with social mobility (Graff 1991). Conversely, in England in the same period, economic growth took place before the majority of the population became literate. As Graff comments in his discussion of the growth of literacy in England,

That demand for literacy neither increased during industrialization (at least as signified by rising rates of literacy) nor was maintained among families of literate parents reinforces the impression that the English industrial revolution

was not fuelled by growing literacy and did not stimulate education in its wake. (1987: 321)

It is therefore reasonable to conclude that literacy in itself does not necessarily bring change either at the level of individual ways of thinking or of social and economic development in the community. Literacy may be implicated in processes of change, but it is not in itself a sufficient cause of change.

### ***2.c Literacy as a Social Practice***

In challenging the inadequacies of the argument of Goody and Watt, Street (1984) argued against any deterministic claims for literacy as an “autonomous” factor in individual and social change. He drew attention to the various ways in which literacy is practised in contemporary society and, on the basis of his anthropological research in Iran, he made the distinctive claim that literacy is socially conditioned; reading and writing take different forms in different contexts and these contexts imbue these various expressions of literacy with different meanings (see also Levine 1986). This was an important theoretical insight with practical implications, raising questions about the nature and purpose of literacy promotion and instruction.

As a basic illustration, Street questioned the validity of the view that literacy consists of a single skill for he pointed out that the various systems of writing used for languages around the world make different demands of the reader. Thus Arabic script, such as used in Iran, is read from right to left, in contrast to Roman script. In addition, the particular forms of individual letters in Arabic script are affected by the position of the letter in the word, unlike the letters of the Roman alphabet. Furthermore, he noted that different conventions might apply to how text is arranged on the page and that the significance of a particular piece of text may vary according to its position, its size or the style of writing used. Rather than a single skill, different skills have to be learned in order to read different orthographies.

At a more fundamental level, Street argued that the practice of reading and writing also varies and that these activities carry the values of the particular social groupings and contexts in which they are practised. He observed that in Iran, three different types of literacy occurred, which were the religious literacy of the “maktab” Islamic schools, the commercial literacy of the local fruit growing industry, and the school literacy of the young people in formal education in the cities.

In the Islamic schools, children were taught to approach text as the source of moral truth and to see a reality in them to which their status as stories would not otherwise have entitled them. Through literacy, the children were taught the values of their culture, which then influenced their way of understanding life in general. As they attended the school and learned to read, they were acculturated into a particular way of viewing the world and of thinking and speaking.

The villagers who learned religious literacy in the Islamic schools made use of their knowledge of the basic skills of literacy and developed them for use in an entirely differ-

ent sphere of activity, that of the commercial fruit farming sector. This, incidentally, suggests that some element of literacy is indeed transferable. The skills involved were to some extent similar, including, for instance, the ability to scan pages for significant information and to recognise the importance of what was written according to its position, form or style, but they were also somewhat different, involving more complex systems of classifying, greater use of numeracy and a considerable production of documents. This literacy was also distinct in serving an economic rather than a religious purpose.

Similarly, the literacy associated with the school students had a separate identity of its own. Unlike the religious and commercial texts read by the village people, the texts read by the students were schoolbooks, magazines and newspapers, with very different content and written in more complex language. They were a source of secular knowledge and the potential means of access to sought-after professional employment. Unlike the people conversant with “maktab” literacy who transferred their skills to the commercial sector, the school students were not automatically able to take part in commercial literacy, not just because these involved different and complex practices which required separate initiation but more importantly because they did not have the status and authority in the village necessary for being accepted into the commercial community (Street 2000: 23). Thus, instead of literacy being a singular phenomenon, Street distinguished three different “literacies” (1984: 8) in one community. These were three separate ways of using literacy, each characteristic of a particular social grouping and each being the means of expression of the practices and values of those groupings.

In strong contrast to the view of literacy as a skill producing general effects autonomously and independently of other factors, Street went on to conclude that literacy can only be understood in relation to its context. He lays emphasis on literacy as “ideological” in the sense that it is inseparable from the particular values and ideas of those who make use of it. It is implicated in issues of power, authority and differentiation in society which are worked out in different ways according to the context (Street 1993b: 7-8), through particular features of texts or how they are used (Papen 2005c).

Street’s perspective is valuable in that it provides a way of probing beneath the surface of social experience and uncovering realities which would remain hidden from a purely skills-based view of literacy. It challenges assumptions, especially regarding the supposedly neutral and value-independent nature of literacy. Instead, it argues that literacy has to be thought of in socially contingent terms and as a means for the conveying of the particular values of the community in which it occurs. In the context of educational programmes aimed at the teaching of literacy, it is important to note that the social view argues that the process of learning the skills of literacy is as ideological as any other expression of literacy in that it is not only particular skills which are being taught but also particular ways of thinking about text and interacting with it (Barton 2007). The teacher of literacy, whether to children or adults, is not only an instructor in an area of technical expertise but a communicator of particular values and ways of understanding literacy and the world. In religious schools in Iran and elsewhere, literacy is taught for the purpose of religious duty, and emphasis is placed on absorbing rather than critiquing the text (Street 1984). In contrast, in western schools, as Street and Street (1991) demonstrate, literacy is



more likely to be seen as being linked with good citizenship. They argue that in any formal schooling situation literacy becomes an object of study and is ascribed a standardised form which privileges certain conventions of expression and disallows others. The process of learning is separated from life outside of school and children are taught to accept particular conventions of expression uncritically. Equally, adult literacy programmes convey particular ideologies of literacy arising from the viewpoints of the programme organisers and teachers.

The socially contingent meaning of literacy which the social view of literacy emphasises has been illustrated in recent years by numbers of studies from around the world. For example, among the Mende people of Sierra Leone (Bledsoe and Robey 1993), the literacy found in the formal education system contrasts sharply with that of the traditional literacy in the community, and not just in the sense that one is in English and the other in Arabic, even if it is true that different languages may be associated with different literacies (Street 2000). For Mende people, school literacy is associated with modernity, access to material possessions and a comfortable life, whereas the local literacy serves a religious purpose where, according to Bledsoe and Robey, it is regarded as a means of access to secret knowledge.

In certain places, literacy may have a particular significance as the means of expression of the value of local culture and of the importance of protecting it from potentially more dominant language groups. This is true of the Pulaar people in Senegal who are proud of their cultural identity and who see literacy as a means of giving value to their language and way of life (Fagerberg-Diallo 2001). In Namibia, the recent history of the country has led to literacy being regarded in the national discourse as a vital contributor to national development and social reconciliation (Papen 2001).

The primary commitment of the social practice view is to the realities of literacy use in society, rather than to literacy as an abstract concept with certain universal qualities. It uncovers a diversity which is not easily explained by generalised theories. It reveals that whatever the effects of literacy on people might be, as considered by some theorists, people are active agents in making use of literacy and incorporating it into their community life. People “take hold” of literacy, to use the frequently quoted phrase of Kulick and Stroud (1993). It is not that literacy makes people conform to its own imperatives, but rather that people make literacy conform to their already established ways of thinking and being (Besnier 1995).

As applied in relation to educational programmes for adults, one of the major contributions of the social view of literacy is the useful frame of reference which it provides to literacy practitioners interacting with people engaged in structured literacy learning. It underlines the point that learners are not passive and empty vessels which can be filled with the knowledge of literacy but that they are people with knowledge and experience who are active participants in learning. They approach literacy learning with their own perspectives. This therefore demands a contextualised and non-uniform response from the providers of literacy learning. This may not be easy to translate into specific pedagogical strategies, at least within the context of formal education systems (Kim 2003), although it

is somewhat easier within non-formal programmes for adults. Nevertheless, it raises the awareness of the instructors and teachers of the relationship which they should have with their learners as well as of the socially contingent nature of the particular literacy which they are teaching. Literacy instruction therefore becomes not so much a matter of teaching skills as socialising learners into particular literacy practices (Street 1984).

In recent years, the attention on literacy as ideological has diminished in favour of a focus on literacy as “situated”. Both terms draw attention to the diversity of literacy in practice but the concept of situated literacy is concerned less with making the argument for the ideological nature of literacy and more with describing its various expressions in particular contexts. Many collections of studies of situated literacies have been published in recent years, each providing further illumination on literacy in its local context (Barton *et al.* 2000, Crowther *et al.* 2001, Prinsloo and Breier 1996, Street 2005). In a similar way, my study gives pre-eminence to the situated nature of literacy, rather than its ideological nature.

## ***2.d Defining Literacy Practices***

In order to examine the place of literacy in any particular community, the social view of literacy has introduced the concept of literacy practices as a means of analysis. Barton and Hamilton describe literacy practices as “the general cultural ways of using literacy which people draw on in their lives” (1998: 6). For Street, literacy practices are “particular ways of thinking about and doing reading and writing in cultural contexts” (2000: 22). This term has to be distinguished from “literacies” and “literacy events”.

Literacy practices offer a smaller unit of analysis than “literacies” which can be seen as constellations of related literacy practices. In the case of Iran, the commercial literacy of the fruit traders could be explored in terms of more specific literacy practices such as those relating to the manner of keeping records of transactions, the methods of making payment through the use of cheques, or the marking of the crates of fruit to indicate their owner.

At the same time, literacy practices offer a larger unit of analysis than “literacy events”. These are particular occasions when people make use of a text, whether a single person reading a book or any number of people engaged in a shared activity which features some form of reading or writing (Barton and Hamilton 1998, Heath 1983). A church service may be regarded as a literacy event in that the written word occurs in various ways such as in the notes used by the leader, the songbooks used by the choir, or the Bible which is read to the congregation. Equally, leading the worship, singing the songs, and reading the Bible could all be analysed as separate literacy events within the larger event of the whole service. To the extent that literacy events may be repeated and take a regular form, they merge into the concept of literacy practices. In turn, the various literacy practices of a particular church may be seen as a particular literacy and incorporated into the wider concept of “religious literacies” when discussing all the ways in which literacy features in the life of the church, or across various churches and denominations.

There is, however, a further important distinction between literacy events and literacy practices. As Street comments, “You can photograph literacy events but you cannot pho-

tograph literacy practices.” (2000: 21) This is true, at least to the extent that practices within the social practice perspective are taken to include the abstract conceptualisations which people hold about literacy and attach to it. Barton and Hamilton clarify this further when they write that literacy practices “involve values, attitudes, feelings and social relationships” (1998: 6). They go on to say,

...at the same time, practices are the social processes which connect people with one another, and they include shared cognitions represented in ideologies and social identities. (ibid.)

While accepting the invisible character of literacy practices, I would prefer to describe practices as possessing a dual nature which is both visible and invisible. Practices certainly include intangible thoughts, feelings and opinions, but they also consist of actions which are repeated in a habitual manner. This aspect of literacy practices can be observed. Through observation over a period of time, it becomes apparent whether what might initially be regarded as an isolated literacy event is in fact pointing to the existence of a literacy practice.

Local life gives space for literacy in various ways and conditions how it is used; it makes certain ways of using literacy possible and others less possible or not possible at all. How literacy is used therefore gives a clue as to how people think about literacy. Thus, if people use literacy for writing letters to their relatives, this implies at a simple level that they believe that literacy is useful for that purpose. Their perspective may be considerably more complex than this, but what people do with literacy is important for indicating underlying attitudes which can be revealed through more directed questioning. As Street suggests (above), literacy practices are made up of both what people do with literacy and their understandings of it. In this study, I focus particularly on the second aspect, namely what literacy means to people rather than what they do with it.

Bartlett and Holland (2002) propose that literacy practices are to be understood in a wider sense than Barton and Hamilton and Street have done. From the perspective of cultural studies, they consider that literacy practices are located in the context of broader “figured worlds” in which particular actors, actions and artefacts are associated together to form a meaningful social construction. In this sense, a figured world is not far removed from Gee’s concept of Discourse (see page 23) and it is closely related to identity and self-perception. Bartlett and Holland show how the concept of the “educated person” acts as in a symbolic way as a “figured world” which can inspire or discourage adults as they engage in literacy learning. While introducing a new depth in the discussion of literacy practices, Bartlett and Holland do not offer a significantly different interpretation of the term, although their insistence on the power of figured worlds to influence behaviour is valuable.

Many studies have been conducted into literacy practices in a wide range of contexts. Street observes that literacy practices are sites of “richness and complexity” in human experience (2005: 4) for they are occasions when people engage with literacy, make use of it, position themselves in relation to it and understand it in a limitless variety of differ-

ent ways. Consequently, it is not surprising that much research within this tradition has been focused on elucidating this complexity. A number of such studies (such as Barton and Hamilton 1998, Kalman 1999, Kalman 2001, Papen 2005b, Rockwell 2001) point out that such complexity reveals the agency of people who might be considered as lacking in literacy competency by those who regard literacy as a matter of skills alone. This serves as an important corrective to a view which categorises people as illiterate and assumes that such people are handicapped by a significant lack or a deficit which needs to be addressed (see Papen 2005c, Rogers *et al.* 1999).

Literacy practices are generally thought to be located at the level of communities as a whole or of groups within a community, but they are also to be found at the level of individuals who have their own ways of acting and thinking in relation to literacy. People have views about when and how literacy is to be practised, and by whom. They have views about what constitutes literacy and being literate.

It is important to note that the practices of individual people are influenced but are not necessarily conditioned by those of their community, for individuals have the power to act as independent agents. Bourdieu's concept of "habitus" (Bourdieu 1977) is helpful in showing how individual action takes place within the boundaries set by the individual person's experience and history as lived in his or her community but that individual actions are not necessarily controlled in an entirely deterministic manner. Similarly, in the field of psychology, Ajzen (1988) holds that individual behaviour is conditioned by the behaviour of the community of which the individual is part, but that, at the same time, individuals are capable of acting and thinking independently. For this reason, in considering the literacy practices of a community, it is essential to go beyond the observation of practices across the community and to engage with the people who are members of the community, as I do in this study.

For the purposes of this study, I take literacy practices to be repeated patterns of literacy use which are meaningful in terms of their wider social and cultural context and which express the understandings of literacy of those who take part in them.

## ***2.e Recent Critiques of the Social Practice View***

Although the social view of literacy is now well established within the field of literacy studies, it is not without challenge. It has been accused of romanticising and relativising local literacy practices through paying too much attention to them and implying that they have a significance equal to that of more socially recognised forms of literacy when in fact they fail to provide access to the more empowering literacies which enable people and communities to advance in the modern world (Street 1996, 2001b). Street rejects these arguments by pointing out that the social perspective on literacy focuses on apparently insignificant forms of literacy precisely in order to highlight the dimension of power which is inherent in any literacy practice, whether as powerfulness or powerlessness. Furthermore, the social perspective has a strong interest in the application of its theoretical insights to matters of policy. It sensitises literacy programme organisers to local uses of literacy which are as important to learners as more dominant forms. Such a commitment to the application of theory to practice is well evidenced in the many published mono-

graphs and papers which discuss the implications for adult literacy instruction of the research they present (Barton *et al.* 2007, Prinsloo and Breier 1996, Robinson-Pant 2004a, Street 2005).

The social practice view has also been charged in recent years with paying too little attention to what is common and general. Brandt and Clinton (2002) take the view that local literacy practices are not totally free of the effect of global influences and that the observable patterns of literacy around the world suggest that something more is at work than a coincidence of many independent local practices. In their search for a middle path between the particularity of the social practice view with its emphasis on local expressions of literacy and the universality of the autonomous view, they describe literacy as a “trans-contextualising social agent” (2002: 8), giving the example from Besnier (1995) of western T shirts with printed slogans being worn by women on an isolated Polynesian island, an illustration, they suggest, of ways in which one context is linked with another. They argue that, like a tangible object, literacy possesses characteristics in its own right, especially the capacity to connect, mediate and endure. They argue for a two-way process of interaction between literacy and its context in which one affects the other. I consider that such interaction may well occur but that its form is entirely dependent on local conditions and has to be uncovered through close examination and research.

The transcontextualising agency of literacy is conveyed to the local setting through literacy “sponsors” (Brandt 1998, 2001) who promote particular content, uses and understandings of literacy. They take many forms. They may be commercial interests, powerful institutions or governments. Alternatively, they may be found at a more individual level, such as in the case of parents introducing their children to literacy and encouraging them to make use of it for particular purposes. The ebb and flow of different literacies in society over time can be explained to some extent in terms of the varying influence of literacy sponsors. I will explore literacy sponsorship at the local level in more depth in Chapter 8.

An alternative critique of the social practice view is that it does not give sufficient attention to issues of power and identity which, as Collins and Blot (2003) argue, have to be taken into account for a fuller understanding of the nature and workings of literacy in society. This charge is somewhat surprising seeing that one of the distinguishing features of the social view is that it highlights the issue of power within literacy (see, for example, the discussion of dominant literacy practices in Barton and Hamilton 1998) but Collins and Blot are not satisfied that the social view goes far enough in this direction. Bringing in the philosophical concerns of French thinkers such as Derrida, de Certeau, Foucault and Bourdieu, they discuss the reasons for the unique value and symbolic importance ascribed to literacy in industrialised countries and they argue that this is due to its value as a channel for the exercise of power. For them, “literacy practices are suffused with power” (2003: 167). This may be located at a “global” level (i.e. outside of the immediate context) or at the “local” level where literacy is practised in immediate lived experience. With Brandt and Clinton, they search for a connection between local and global aspects of literacy and they locate this within a framework of contested power.

By way of illustration, Collins and Blot appeal to several examples of how particular forms of literacy have been imposed in new settings through the conquest and colonisation of one culture by another, whether overtly by the force of arms, as the *conquistadores* did in central and south America, or by less aggressive means, as missionaries of different religions have done and continue to do. Even in cultures where literacy is already being practised, this local form is displaced by the language, practices and forms of the conquerors, who, in the terms of Brandt and Clinton are more powerful sponsors of literacy.

At the same time, Collins and Blot point to the process of resistance by which those being subjugated seek to exercise their own power by attempting to protect themselves and their literacies from the conquerors or to reassert what is being threatened with disappearance. The power of literacy in this conflict is well demonstrated by the examples, which they and others give, of the appropriation of literacy in the cause of language preservation and maintenance. Arguably, this is not so much power “over”, or power “in relation to others”, as it is in cases of one literacy challenging or suppressing another (Winter 2000), but rather power “to be”, or power in its microscopic dimension, as Collins and Blot describe it. However, there may not always be a clear distinction between the two: what is self-expression to one person or group may be felt as an imposition by others.

At the individual level, literacy enables people to achieve a greater degree of personal autonomy and to do what they could not do before. In this sense, power is a matter of using literacy for whatever purpose one identifies as important. It is power to express and to expand one’s human potential.

Such a focus on the power aspect of literacy is welcome as it brings attention to processes which are certainly implicated in literacy and its uses. This represents another challenge to the concept of the inherent autonomous power of literacy and it impels those who are involved in the promotion and teaching of literacy in industrialised or developing countries to examine further the underlying reasons and motivations for their actions.

## ***2.f My Approach to Literacy***

As I have demonstrated above, a range of perspectives exists on the nature and characteristics of literacy. This is not surprising in view of the complexity of this concept. For some, literacy is located in the individual, where it is seen in terms of a transferable skill which can be acquired through instruction. For others, it is located in society and is to be found in interactions between people, taking various forms according to those making use of it and the context in which they put it to use. In this section, I will explain the view of literacy which informed my research as I explored how literacy is understood by people in northern Cameroon. This is relevant because my own view of literacy inevitably directed my enquiries in particular directions and made me sensitive to some expressions of literacy more than to others, as I will explain in the next chapter.

It is not easy to define what literacy is but I consider that it is best to begin from the assumption that literacy is a matter of communication. In this sense, it is like speech, allowing the person to express him or herself and to convey their perceptions, thoughts

and internal experience to others. Like speech, literacy in itself holds only latent potential and it has no capability of its own until it is used for expression. What it does, and the effect which it then has, depends not so much on itself as on the message which it conveys. Speech is infinitely adaptable, and so is literacy.

Unlike speech, literacy is mediated through visual means which makes it potentially accessible to all who have the capacity of sight. The texts which literacy generates possess a degree of durability which the spoken word alone does not have, with the result that literate communication is not confined to a particular time and place but continues to function as communication for as long as the visual inscription exists and wherever it happens to occur (Tusting 2000). Meaning which is expressed in written form can have a more extensive impact than meaning in oral form even if spoken words can have a greater impact in their immediate context. Distinguishing between oral and literate communication in this way is not to argue that these different modes of communication lead to cognitive or social changes, as the “great divide” theory holds (see Section 2b).

Visual communication can take many forms. Meaning can be conveyed through signs and symbols as well as in writing, and through the various expressions of artistic creativity. For the purposes of this research, which is located in a developing country and which has an interest in basic education for adults, I take the view that the visual form of communication which is of primary importance is that through the medium of reading and writing of text in which meaning is inscribed using some kind of writing system. This is not to deny the importance of other forms of visual representation, nor to downplay the reality that interaction with text is multimodal, involving more than the understanding of letters and words (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001), but in the context of this research it is appropriate to emphasise the pre-eminence of literacy as interaction of the person with a written text. In the area where this research was conducted, literate communication is primarily textual and local people understand literacy in similar terms, as the reading and writing of words on paper.

The meaning within such texts is mostly conveyed in lexical form but it may also be numerical. Literacy and numeracy demand similar abilities of understanding graphic signs. My usage of “literacy” does not extend to its appropriation as a synonym for “competence” as in such neologisms as “film literacy” or “emotional literacy”.

Such an emphasis on text in a definition of literacy is not accepted by all commentators. For instance, Gee sees literacy in much broader terms, and as more to do with personal being in society than with communication. He describes literacy as “mastery of a secondary Discourse”, where “Discourse” is a complex formulation of “saying(writing)-doing-being-valuing-believing” (Gee 1996: 127) and secondary Discourses are the myriad identities which people acquire and play out as they progress through life in their various roles as parents, citizens, office workers, or whatever. Although he includes the reading and writing of text in his definition, it occupies an almost incidental position.

If literacy primarily concerns the reading and writing of text, then I consider that it requires the acquisition of a learned skill. People have to learn the particular graphic system

for representing their language and the conventions for using it. Such learning usually takes place with the help of other people who are already proficient. It can occur in a wide variety of ways, whether in a highly structured course of instruction in a setting focused on this activity or, at the other extreme, in an incidental manner through the occasional help of another person. While fully accepting Street's view of literacy learning as a process of socialisation (Street 1984), I hold that this process must involve the acquisition of the particular skills necessary for the person to make sense of the text which he or she is reading.

Literacy involves an essential element of skill but there is more to literacy than the skill alone. Literacy comes through putting the skills of reading and writing into practice. Literacy is an activity as much as, if not more than, a state. For the individual, it is a matter of "doing" as much as "having" literacy (Bartlett in press, Barton and Hamilton 1998, Scribner and Cole 1981). I consider that to be regarded as literate, a person has to participate in the literacy practices of his or her community and make use of texts in a meaningful manner as a means of communication with others. Competency in literacy comes through use and through putting reading and writing into practice. Seeing that I do not regard literacy as an undifferentiated and transferable skill (see Section 2a), I consider that it is more accurate to describe people as having particular degrees of competency in specific literacies than as literate or not literate.

Since I lay emphasis on the individual dimension of literacy, I do not include as literate people who cannot read and write but who participate in literacy practices by relying on the help of others who are literate. This is a common practice in settings where not everyone is literate or where specialised literacy skills are needed (Jones 2000, Kalman 1999, Malan 1996b). In multilingual situations, it involves an element of linguistic expertise (Baynham and Masing 2000). For the purposes of this research, I do not consider such possessors of "secondary literacy" (Papen 2007, Rogers 2003b) to be literate. Equally, I do not include as literate those who are able to make use of written documents such as identity cards or receipts for the purposes for which they are intended but without being able to read and understand the words written on them. I have no intention here of adopting a judgemental stance towards people who are not literate, and in an attempt to avoid any pejorative connotations attached to the word "illiterate", I therefore prefer to describe them as "non-literate".

Yet literacy has more than an individual dimension. If literacy is a matter of communication, it is necessarily a social phenomenon situated in communities of people who make use of reading and writing for their particular purposes (Barton *et al.* 2000) which vary from context to context. While at one level literacy is a basic human capability, the exercise of it in social interaction leads to much variation and its purpose and significance vary accordingly. The practice of literacy carries different meanings to different people. I fully agree that literacy is "ideological" as Street (1984) argues.

At this point, the political character of literacy is revealed. Human interaction involves the negotiation of identities and relationships, and of people locating themselves in more or less influential positions in relation to others around them. This is an issue of power.



Literacy is implicated in this process, as it is one channel for the expression of relationship. It expresses identity and, as such, the forms of literacy characteristic of a particular context or group of people assume a symbolic importance as markers of the identity and character of that context or group (Collins and Blot 2003, Street 1984). How literacy is practised and the purpose for which it is used then becomes contentious and literacy becomes another arena in which issues of power are worked out. Certain expressions of literacy are privileged over others, and those who do not conform to those norms are marked in some sense as different or, more strongly, as failing to meet the standard of the dominant definition. This was evident in the Mofu context which I investigated in this research, where literacy in French had a symbolic value much greater than that of literacy in Mofu, since French was the language of education which offered potential for advancement. Literacy in Mofu, however, had only a personal and spiritual value at the local level. Young people appeared to exercise a strong preference for literacy in French in contrast to older people who saw a value in literacy in their own language.

While the skill required for literacy is an unchanging human capability, since everyone has the potential to be literate, the practice of literacy is subject to infinite variation. I would agree therefore with the description of literacy as “a fundamentally heterogeneous phenomenon” (Besnier 1995: 5). Its heterogeneity is evident in the multiplicity of purposes to which it can be put. It can serve instrumentally to organise, record, inform, entertain, persuade, acquire knowledge or obtain economic benefit, or symbolically to show membership of a particular community of people. Rassool’s description of literacy as “a communication practice embedded in society and culture, ... deeply implicated in the lives of people, cultural transmission, and cultural reproduction” (Rassool 1999: 3) is apposite.

The social practice view of literacy has very considerable merits in revealing the complexity and variability of literacy practice, but it is not sufficient on its own to give a full account of literacy. It certainly underplays the element of skill which lies at the foundation of any use of literacy by an individual. Papen makes a valid point when she argues that the skills-based view of literacy and the social practice view “...should be seen as complementary or perhaps as two approaches, which emphasise different aspects of the reading and writing process” (2005c: 34). The challenge which therefore arises is to understand the totality of literacy without giving too much attention to one view at the expense of the other.

In an attempt to account for literacy as a whole while maintaining such an appropriate balance, I take the view that literacy possesses both an individual and a social dimension. I see literacy as a communicative practice in which a learned skill is applied by the individual within particular social contexts. Literacy is situated in the complex human environment of the individual which influences his or her way of living and thinking (Besnier 1995, Bourdieu 1977). Contexts are not to be thought of in primarily geographic terms, for their boundaries are broad and fluid, resisting neat delimitation. As I will demonstrate in Chapters 4 to 8, contexts are made up of all the influences which act on an individual, whether social, economic, political, cultural, religious, linguistic or whatever. These influences intersect with every aspect of the identity of the person, for instance as an individual, member of a particular family or ethnic group, resident of a particular

place, or citizen of a particular country, as being male or female, materially well-off or poor, formally educated or not, or adhering to one religious faith or another. The interaction between influences and individual identity is not mechanistic; it is highly complex and not conducive to simple generalisation. Full allowance must be made for individual agency and creativity. If the contextual influences have a spatial dimension, it is through their effect being most concentrated closest to the individual, in his immediate environment. This does not preclude strong influences emanating from further afield, such as from the national government or international development programmes; the power of these will depend on their nature and source, and their authority over the individual and how they are mediated to the individual person through local agents. All this produces a highly complex, diffuse and fascinating picture with important implications for research into how people behave and think, particularly, as in this study, regarding the meaning of literacy.

This was therefore the understanding of literacy which I applied in my research as I explored literacy from the point of view of a group of people in northern Cameroon.

### **3. Methodological Approach**

In this chapter, I will discuss the methodological approach which I adopted for this research. I will discuss in turn various aspects of this methodology, mirroring the sequential series of activities which characterise it. I will first discuss my choice of research methodology, and will then explain the location and timing of my fieldwork, and the content and nature of my participant observation and interviewing activities. This will be followed by discussions of the issues relating to my relationship with my informants and my experience of using interpreters. Later sections in this chapter concern the more technical aspects of recording, transcription, coding and analysis.

Throughout this chapter, I will forefront my own perspective and experiences to enable readers to reach an informed judgement as to the reliability of my research methodology, which forms the basis of my conclusions later in this thesis.

#### **3.a *The Nature of this Study***

This research is best described as a qualitative case study, being characterised by its focus on one setting and on its aim of understanding an aspect of life in that setting from the point of view of the people who live there. The particular aspect of life in question is the local understanding or understandings of literacy. I did not approach my field research with a particular hypothesis which I intended to test and it was not a major thrust of my research to measure the extent of literacy use. Accordingly, this study cannot be regarded as quantitative in its approach.

I made use of some ethnographic methodology in this study. Although the precise nature of ethnography is difficult to define (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007), it is primarily distinguished by its commitment to first-hand experience and the prominence which it gives to participant observation by the researcher in the research site over an extended period of time. Ethnography allows for the use of a variety of methods, including informal interviewing, the examination of documents and texts, and photography, all for the purpose of obtaining an in-depth understanding of the setting in question. As I will explain in detail below, my intention in conducting this research was to enter into the community as fully as I was able and to explore the meaning of literacy from the perspective of the local people, and I made use of all of the ethnographic research techniques which I have just mentioned.

However, it would not be appropriate to describe this study as “an ethnography” since ethnography differs from other research approaches in its emphasis on the exploration of the relationship between the researcher and the researched as well as the manner of presentation of research studies. I do not examine in detail issues of my changing perspective as I moved at various times between being an outsider and an insider, nor in this thesis do I present extended passages from my field notes describing literacy events in which I participated. Furthermore, I approached my research site with a set of research questions which were clearly defined and related to one specific aspect of local life (see page 6). In all these senses, this study cannot be regarded as essentially ethnographic.

This research is most appropriately described as a detailed qualitative case study. Methodologically, it was in part informed by the principles of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967), especially in my choice of interviewees and in my analysis of my data, and I will explain these further in Sections 3e and 3i below.

Qualitative research served as a helpful strategy for my research as it has the advantage of allowing for, and even insisting upon, a holistic approach to the research subject, whether this is a particular topic, a geographical location or a person. It does not make a hypothesis or presuppositions which it then attempts to test but it rather approaches research with a strong desire to allow understanding to develop in the very process of the research. In this sense, it is more an inductive than a deductive approach, although it inevitably combines both elements, as when previous theoretical understandings of the data are used to check new observations (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

Furthermore, qualitative research accepts the complexity of human lived experience in which actions and beliefs cannot easily be linked to a simple process of cause and effect and in which it is rarely possible to isolate single factors which lead to predictable outcomes. Human beings and the society in which they live are by nature extremely complex.

As my research set out from the theoretical basis of literacy as a social practice (see Chapter 2), qualitative methodologies readily came to hand, as other researchers in this field have found (such as Barton and Hamilton 1998, Kalman 1999, Prinsloo and Breier 1996). The social practice view of literacy conceives of literacy as consisting of particular literacy practices located in particular contexts and as explicable only in terms of the contexts in which these practices occur. Therefore, a methodological approach is required which is suited to a detailed exploration of these practices and their contexts. Qualitative approaches serve this purpose well since they enable the researcher to enter into the centre of an existing social context and to explore it from different angles, discovering new pathways of enquiry as the research progresses. They aim to represent both the context and the topic of enquiry in terms which are meaningful to those who are insiders (Jackson 2004, Papi 2005c).

Although such methods of enquiry cannot be subjected to the same means of evaluation as quantitative research, they can nevertheless lay claim to reliability and validity. These two terms are “clearly related but not identical” (Davies 1999: 85). In qualitative research, reliability arises from the depth and richness of the observations. It is a methodological issue and a matter of ensuring that data is collected in a manner which is sufficiently rigorous to allow conclusions to be drawn from them. Validity, however, concerns interpretation and the reasonableness of the particular conclusions which are drawn. If readers consider that research reports are plausible and trustworthy, they are likely to feel confident in the validity of their conclusions (Guba and Lincoln 2005, James *et al.* 1997, Maxwell 1992).

However valid an account may be, it remains partial because it is the product of the interaction between a particular researcher or researchers and particular research informants. In these post-modern times, it cannot claim objective reality and it does well to hold fast

to a certain degree of humility about its representational efficiency (Clifford and Marcus 1986, Spencer 2001). However, if such methodologies are only a form of fiction or poetry, as Clifford and Marcus propose, they provide a very weak foundation for any attempt to inform some kind of social action, such as literacy education. Accordingly, I contend that this thesis, while it could never be the final and definitive study of literacy in the Mofu-Gudur area, can nevertheless make a substantial contribution to deeper understanding of literacy in this context and to the successful implementation of local literacy programmes.

### **3.b *This Study as a Case***

The research reported in this thesis constitutes a “case study” in the qualitative tradition as described by Stake (2005), in that it is a “specific, unique, bounded system”. As such, it is a clearly defined object of study, even if, as my research demonstrates, the outer limits of the system are not easily delimited. In this study, the focus of attention is essentially geographic since my research took place in one particular part of Cameroon. These geographical limits could also be defined as linguistic limits since they represent the extent of the area in which the Mofu-Gudur language is spoken. However, my interest did not lie so much in the language as in the place and meaning of literacy for the people living in the area, whether this was literacy in their own or any other language. Linguistically and culturally, the Mofu-Gudur area is not clearly distinct from the region in which it is located.

Within this geographical area, my research focused exclusively on Mofu-Gudur people resident in the area, some of whom described themselves as literate and others as non-literate. I did not include local residents who were not Mofu-Gudur by birth, nor did I include Mofu-Gudur people living elsewhere in the country. These choices were appropriate as my intention was to make a particular link between the views of people in the area and the local literacy programmes, on the assumption that my research might be of interest to these programmes as they planned how best to engage with local people, especially those who were not literate, whom they might regard as their target population.

Stake argues that case studies are important, above all, for their intrinsic interest and for what can be learned within and from them. They are not merely illustrations of some more general phenomena. He allows that case studies can also serve an “instrumental” purpose (op. cit.: 445) when they contribute to broader theory, but if they are chosen merely as examples of some more general principle then they no longer constitute case studies in the full sense of the word. My choice of research site was certainly motivated more by a desire to explore what could be found in this particular situation than by a belief that it would provide evidence for something which I had already decided to test. Nevertheless, I hoped that it would serve an instrumental purpose through raising issues for consideration both by the local literacy programmes and by other researchers and practitioners in other contexts. I consider it therefore to be a “telling” rather than a “typical” case (Mitchell 1984: 239).

In line with the methodological principles of case studies, I explored this case in detail and in a holistic manner, making use of a wide-angle lens in an effort to be open to as

many different aspects of life in this particular setting as possible. In the centre of my field of vision were the research questions which were my main interest (see page 6) but an awareness of economic, cultural, religious and other issues was also important, and indeed essential, since these were likely to provide at least part of the answer to my questions. As my research progressed, I became increasingly aware of the real importance of these influences.

This was one expression of the trajectory of my research which developed as my knowledge of the Mofu context grew. Whereas I had initially intended to look closely at how the conceptions of literacy within the local literacy programmes matched with those of people engaged in literacy learning, as my research progressed my attention turned increasingly away from the literacy programmes and towards the local community as a whole. I became aware of the various changes affecting the lives of local people and I began to sense that these had a particular impact on their thinking about literacy. From this, in the inductive manner typical of qualitative research, grew the realisation that their views of literacy were influenced by the whole of the context in which they lived.

### ***3.c Fieldwork – Location***

Stake (2005) argues that the particular choice of research site for a case study should be chosen on the basis of its potential in providing an opportunity to learn. In view of the anticipated relevance of my research to the implementation of literacy programmes for adults in developing countries, I had to identify a research site where adult literacy programmes were in operation. This implied a more or less low level of literacy competence in the local community.

It seemed most appropriate to carry out my research in Africa given my interest in the continent and my previous experience of it. I considered various options but it soon became apparent that Cameroon would be a suitable place for my research. This was in recognition of the ten years I had spent working in the country (see Chapter 1a), and my ability to speak French, the official language which is spoken throughout most of the country. My knowledge of Cameroon assisted me in preparing for the fieldwork, as I knew in advance what to expect in terms of documentation, relationships with local authorities and internal transport possibilities, not to mention climate, food and health issues.

This choice was also linked with my membership of SIL (see page 2), and my ongoing interest in the work being done by the organisation in Cameroon. Although my formal relationship with SIL in the country came to an end in 1999, and I have had no ongoing responsibilities there since then, I have continued to receive news of its activities on a regular basis and to keep in touch with some of my colleagues working there. My request to return to the country to carry out research was met with approval by the SIL director, who gave me liberty to select a site for my research. Although I received a certain amount of funding for my research from SIL at the international level and in the UK, I was not under any contractual obligation to the organisation in carrying out the research, other than to supply a copy of my completed study. This had the benefit of enabling me to avoid some of the complex issues faced by Robinson-Pant (2001a, 2001b) in her research in Nepal. She found, for instance, that she was not able to exercise the normal freedom of

an ethnographer to modify the focus of her research, as she had to meet the expectations of the NGO which had given her permission to conduct research. I was not subject to such expectations but I nevertheless undertook this research in the hope that it might be relevant to my colleagues within the organisation. My discussion in Chapter 9 of the implications of my findings for issues of practice is intended to be of particular interest to them.

I do not consider that my previous experience undermined my ability to enter into my chosen research site with an open mind. Before I began my research, my knowledge of this particular area was limited to superficial impressions only. I had paid a private visit to colleagues working in the area in 1992 and had had a little contact with some of the Cameroonian people involved in the literacy work there when I worked in the regional SIL office.

I could have chosen many different locations in Cameroon for my research but I finally chose the Mofu-Gudur area for a variety of reasons. Firstly, it had the benefit of offering me a location where an SIL-sponsored literacy programme was in operation. Given that I hoped that my research would be of relevance to the literacy activities of SIL, it was particularly appropriate to choose a research site where such a programme was being conducted. Secondly, it was important to me that other literacy programmes were also operating in the area since I hoped to learn from their approach to literacy work which I expected might be somewhat different from what I was familiar with in SIL.

Thirdly, practical considerations also entered into the decision, especially that the SIL linguists resident in the Mofu-Gudur area, Ken and Judy Hollingsworth, were in easy contact by email while I was making a choice of research site. They responded with interest to my enquiry regarding the suitability of the area for my research and they extended an invitation to me to come. As Stake (2005) argues, such practical issues actually enhance the opportunity to learn which the case provides, and in no way diminish its value.

Choosing a research site where colleagues were working had the additional practical benefit of providing me with readily available and comfortable accommodation, as I was able to stay in their house in the village of Mowo throughout my fieldwork. They were away for most of the time I spent in the village but they provided me with a quantity of background information and helped me to make introductions to key people in the area. This helped in the initial stages of my research, although I was also able to develop my own contacts and relationships independently. Living in their house gave me the additional benefit of contact with their employees and colleagues who came to work in their office building. They made life more comfortable for me as I was less isolated but they were also accessible and important sources of information for me and a means by which I could triangulate information I had been given by other people (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007).

Most of my research was conducted in the village of Mowo. This became my particular focus of attention within the Mofu-Gudur area. As my aim was to understand this case in depth, and not to survey the views of the whole population, I did not attempt to interact with people equally across the whole area. Breadth and depth are not always compatible and I decided that concentrating on depth would be more suitable for my research purposes as it would give me a detailed knowledge of local literacy practices in a clearly

defined location. To have extended my enquiries too widely would have run the risk of the immediate context becoming too diffuse and my observations becoming less grounded in a reality which was important to my interviewees whose identity resided primarily in belonging to this particular village. Most of my interviews were therefore with residents of the village, but I travelled more extensively in the area when I wanted to interview key figures or visit the classes of the various local literacy programmes.

### ***3.d Fieldwork – Timing***

My fieldwork consisted of almost nine months in Cameroon, of which over seven months were in Mowo or nearby. The total period was divided into several distinct sections extending from the end of 2005 to the middle of 2007. During this time, I made a total of four separate visits to Mowo from the UK. The first, for three weeks at the end of 2005, was for the joint purpose of verifying my choice of the Mofu-Gudur area as my research site and of observing two training courses for literacy teachers being run by the largest of the local literacy programmes. It also gave me an opportunity to carry out some pilot interviews. I then returned early in 2006 for four months.

I had intended to make another visit later in the year but family reasons caused me to delay my return until early in 2007. I then stayed for four months, including a break over Easter in the UK. In other circumstances, I would probably have made fewer visits to Cameroon and stayed in the country for longer on each occasion but family responsibilities and the impossibility of my wife accompanying me to Cameroon for the whole fieldwork phase dictated that more and shorter visits were necessary.

My decision to begin my research late in 2005 arose out of my interest in visiting local literacy classes while they were taking place. In the northern part of Cameroon, literacy teaching happens only during some four months of the year, usually beginning in January, with training courses for teachers immediately beforehand. This period of the year is when local people have least work in their fields, so they have time for literacy learning in classes. At other times of the year, the demands of the agricultural cycle are too great to allow this. My research therefore had the advantage of taking place over two literacy seasons, giving me a good opportunity to interact with the local literacy programmes and with the general population who were also relatively free to give me attention, even if they were not involved in the literacy classes.

### ***3.e Engaging in Local Life***

I lived not only in the area where I conducted my research but also on the edge of the village where most of my interviews took place (see Map 3, page 187), so it was relatively easy for me to be involved in local life. Sometimes my position was simply that of a local resident, at other times I was the professional researcher. My contact with local people ranged therefore from informal to formal, depending on my particular activity.

Living in the village was the first step towards becoming a “participant observer”, a role which is inherent in ethnography and which Spradley (1980) describes as possessing particular characteristics. These include observing while participating, paying attention to what is usually ignored, being aware of one’s own actions and reactions, and keeping re-



cords of one's observations and impressions. In short, participant observers take part in the life of people in their research sites as a means of understanding their lives and the particular topics of his interest. Such a role inevitably has its limitations (Clammer 1984, Holy 1984, Tonkin 1984) even if these are not always recognised by commentators (such as Bernard 1995) who overestimate the degree to which researchers can blend into the groups which they are studying. Spradley (ibid.) proposes that the degree of participation which is possible varies from one field work context to another and from one situation to another within a particular piece of fieldwork. In my case, my overall level of participation could be classified in Spradley's terms as "moderate" in that I took part in events where I could but I remained very obviously an observer. As a foreigner living in an unfamiliar setting on a temporary basis, with a limited understanding of the local language, it was impossible to engage in local life on the same terms as those who were full and long-term members of the community. Furthermore, my role as a researcher, often occupied in writing down notes in an exercise book while others were engaged in the event or activity in question, could not fail to mark me out. I certainly did not relate to Mofu people in the same way as they related to one another, nor did I expect to do so. I discuss this further in Chapter 10c.

Nevertheless, living in the village was extremely helpful as it was important for my research that I should have as clear an understanding as possible of the features of life in the area. In any situation, these form the backdrop against which people make use of literacy and position themselves in relation to it. In line with the theory of literacy as social practice (see Chapter 2), it was important for me to look at literacy issues in the context of people's lives (Barton *et al.* 2007). For this reason, I tried to be always vigilant to notice how and when literacy featured in any event which I observed. Even discarded scraps of paper lying on the ground attracted my attention as I walked around the village.

My daily journal proved to be useful for recording my observations, comments and questionings about local life and it formed an important part of my data. I also took many photographs which helped me to record aspects of local life. I was particularly interested in evidence of literacy use in the area so, for instance, I took pictures of the texts which people possessed in their homes and the posters, signs and graffiti in public places. In addition, I collected whatever documents were relevant to my research including copies of the teaching materials used by the literacy programmes in the area, the newspapers produced by the cotton company (see Fig 11, page 104) and the letters which people wrote to me for various reasons.

My weekly routine varied somewhat according to the particular phase of my research. While I was conducting interviews, I would go out with my research assistant two or three times each week to visit local people in the morning, and usually work on keyboarding and analysis in the afternoons. All the literacy classes in the area took place in the afternoons, so I would go out about twice each week to visit them. At the weekends, I would often go to Maroua, the main town in the region, in order to make purchases in the market or to send and receive emails when I was unable to do this from Mowo. On Sundays, I would normally attend one of the local churches, usually Baptist or Catholic, and

sometimes go to the local market immediately afterwards in Mokong, the next village to Mowo.

I visited the classes of five local literacy programmes in all, as far as possible attempting to visit each class on several occasions in order to reach a more informed impression of what typically took place in each one. I visited two classes of the major literacy programme on four occasions each and, in the case of two other literacy programmes, two separate classes on one occasion each. I also visited the classes of two other programmes in Mowo, one of these on one occasion and the other on three occasions. I normally stayed through the whole time of each lesson and had some interaction with the learners and teachers. I also attended a one-day teacher training course being run by one of the churches and a one-day meeting for literacy class supervisors.

From time to time, I attended special events taking place locally. I took a particular interest in the local cotton industry in view of its importance to the local economy, so on two occasions I spent time at the cotton markets where local growers bring their crop for weighing and sale to the cotton company. I was particularly interested in the bureaucratic procedures involved and in how the growers interacted with the official receipt which they were given as many of them were unable to read what was written on it. I also attended a meeting regarding a Fairtrade scheme for cotton being started in the village, and the elections for the committee of the local growers' association. When my visit to a literacy class was aborted as the class had been unexpectedly cancelled, I attended the distribution of payments to the growers, which was the reason for the cancellation of the class. This was a major literacy (and numeracy) event which takes place only once a year in each village and is never announced in advance for security reasons, so I was particularly pleased at this serendipitous discovery. Being in the right place at the right time is one aspect of ethnographic methodology (Behar 2003, Greverus 2003) and it complements well the systematic approach required for the grounding of theory.

In a more intentional way, I attended several other local events: the local celebration of Youth Day on 11th February 2007, the National Day celebration in the nearby town of Mokolo on 20th May 2007 when local schools paraded and performed, and a fund raising event in Mokong, organised by the local Development Committee for the construction of a new secondary school.

Living in Mowo meant that I was as accessible to the local people as they were to me. Inevitably, as a white person, I was seen as the source of financial help by people who were in difficulties, as many people were in this area of high poverty and annual food shortages. As I was staying in the house of the Hollingsworths who frequently gave financial and other help to the local people, I probably received more requests for help than I would otherwise have done, especially as my hosts were away for most of the time I spent in the village. I tried to respond to each request on its merits, helping some people but not others, giving greater priority to food and repairs to damaged roofs than the costs of renting fields. My lack of proficiency in the local language prevented oral interaction but it led to people in need, who were often non-literate, bringing me a letter written in

French on their behalf by a friend. I was thus involved as a participant in what I discovered to be a recognised local literacy practice (see page 86).

A further advantage of living in the village was that I had many opportunities to meet local people, which made it easy to put similar questions to more than one person. This was important because I came to realise that people varied in their responses to me, even regarding incidental factual information about village life, such as the line of the original road through the village. Asking several people the same question was all the more important when some element of opinion was involved, such as the typical amount of millet which a farmer would expect to grow on a field of a certain size, or the length of time since the practice began of advertising the sale of *bil-bil*, the local millet beer, by placing a piece of paper on a stick beside the road.

I also had contact with life outside the immediate Mofu-Gudur area, and particularly with the local authorities. I announced my arrival to the official in Mokolo responsible for the local administrative *département* which covers the Mofu-Gudur area and on two occasions encountered the local gendarmes when they stopped me while carrying out checks of travellers on the main road. I also interacted with the officials responsible for the renewal of car documents, which turned out to involve a more lengthy process than I had anticipated. All these contacts, together with those involved in travelling through the country by bus and train between Mowo and Yaoundé to reach the international airport, helped to ensure that my research into literacy in the Mofu-Gudur area included some exposure to the wider national culture.

### **3.f Interviewing**

A significant part of the data for my research was elicited through interviews with a total of 77 individuals. Of these, 36 were local people from Mowo, some of whom were literate and others were not, and 35 were people involved in the literacy programmes in the wider Mofu area as learners, teachers, or organisers. The six remaining interviewees were individuals with a variety of other contributions to make to my research, including my research assistants and two other researchers whom I met in the village. A list of all the people whom I interviewed will be found in Appendix 1.

Interviewing was an indispensable technique which enabled me to enter to some degree into the experience of the local people and listen to them as they talked about literacy and their lives. Because my research aimed to understand people's views on literacy and not just their uses of literacy, it was essential to talk to people and listen to what they had to say.

I consider that my interviews were "semi-structured" in the sense that they took place as a result of deliberate intention, at least on my part, and were shaped around a series of questions through which I led each interviewee with the help of my interpreter. They allowed for spontaneous interaction between my interviewees and me and for new topics to arise which I pursued if they appeared to be fruitful. These were certainly not the rigidly structured interviews of social surveys nor, on the other hand, unstructured interviews which

occur without premeditation and which closely resemble casual conversation (Fontana and Frey 2005, Kemp and Ellen 1984).

My interviewing took place in two phases, coinciding with the two main periods of my research in 2005-2006 and in 2007. Most were conducted in the first period when my aim was to establish an overview of community life and the role of literacy within it. In the second period of my research, I adopted a narrower focus in that I selected three of the original group of local residents and visited each of them several times. This was in order to enter more fully into an understanding of their lives and of the place of literacy within it. I will discuss the understandings of literacy of these three main informants in detail in Chapter 6.

The shift of focus was mirrored by a shift in methodology as I moved from one type of interviewing to another. It was in the second phase of my research that my interviews could be described as ethnographic, at least in the terms used by Heyl (2001). She defines this type of interview as being characterised by extended and frequent interaction between interviewer and interviewee in which the interviewer seeks to understand the world from the point of view of the interviewee, and the interviewee is empowered to shape the course and outcome of the interview. In contrast, my interviews in the first phase were more of the survey type, even if they were not fully structured, since my purpose was to elicit specific pieces of information in a short period of time without any expectation of ongoing contact with these informants.

### **First interviews – literacy teachers in training**

I began in November and December 2005 by interviewing nine men and women who were participating in the two training courses for literacy teachers which I attended. My main purpose was to gain some understanding of local life and especially of educational and literacy aspects within it, and to develop some experience with interviewing. I used a simple interview framework to elicit some basic personal details about each person and their families, including whether they themselves had been to school and whether their children now went to school. In order to explore the multilingual aspect of the local context, I also asked which languages they spoke and which of these they could read and write, asking what they had read or written within the previous week so as to gain some understanding of the extent of their literacy practice. I concluded by enquiring whether they thought that literacy and illiteracy were associated with any kind of advantage for literate people or disadvantage for non-literate people. This framework provided a list of topics to discuss rather than a rigid set of prescribed questions. I later developed the framework for subsequent interviews (see Appendix 2).

These interviews took place during the lunch breaks of the two training courses. I normally interviewed two of the literacy teacher trainees at a time, on the grounds that this would avoid any individual feeling conspicuous through having been singled out and also that it would therefore encourage them to respond to my questions in a relaxed manner. It also saved a little time by making it unnecessary to ask each question twice and it allowed one of the interviewees the opportunity to think about their response while their colleague was answering the question I had posed. Each interview took approximately 20 minutes. I found this to be a satisfactory technique which I continued to use when interviewing

learners in literacy programmes, though not with my later interviews with others such as residents of the village, whom I interviewed on their own. From a practical point of view, interviewing more than one person at a time when conducting these more detailed interviews was not very successful, as I found on one or two occasions; the conversation was more subject to changes of direction, and it was more difficult to explore topics in full and to disentangle the views of each of the interviewees.

Individual and group interviews have different advantages and disadvantages (Hammerley and Atkinson 2007), but the interviews with the literacy teachers in training provided me with valuable initial insights into the local context even if they had to be brief because of the constraints of the course timetable.

### **Residents of Mowo**

My aim when I returned to Mowo early in 2006 was to interact with the wider community to explore the place and meaning of literacy in their lives as well as to gain some understanding of the ordinary features of life for local people. I accordingly developed the interview framework which I had used for the literacy teachers in training to make it more suitable for general use (see Appendix 2). I did this in conjunction with Jean Claude Fandar whom I began to employ as my interpreter and research assistant after my return. As with the framework for the literacy teachers in training, the questions were written in a fairly direct manner to facilitate translation by Jean Claude into Mofu. When conducting interviews, our practice was for me to lead the conversation by asking each question in French direct to the interviewee, then for Jean Claude to translate it into Mofu as most interviewees did not understand French or could not speak it well. Once they had replied, Jean Claude translated their response into French for me. I would then respond with a comment or a question related to their answer. In this way, the topics of the interview were covered without being rigidly tied to the questions as written on the framework. Often additional information was elicited which I followed up as appropriate.

The beginning and end of each interview took a set form. At the beginning, I would explain the purpose of the interview and ask the interviewee's permission to record their responses, adding that I would not share their responses with other people if they did not wish it. At the end, I would thank them for their willingness to be interviewed and confirm that they were willing for me to make use of what they had told me. I also gave them an opportunity to request that I did not use their name in reporting my research and asked if they were willing for me to return on another occasion to ask further questions. Given the set format, I normally asked Jean Claude to pose these questions without my prompting.

The questions in the interview framework served as a guide but I discovered that some of them were more productive than others. I found that there was little value in asking for a lot of detail about the structure of each family since some families were very large, particularly as some men had more than one wife, and members of extended families could be living together in one compound. In addition, family relationships were not defined in the terms with which I was familiar, so it took time to identify the relationships in a manner which I could understand. As my main interest in interviewing any particular person was in literacy related matters, I found that it was sufficient to obtain a general picture of

how many adults and children were living in a compound, rather than pay attention to their precise family profile.

I also had to modify the question regarding the interviewees' reading and writing practices during the previous week because this was too specific for many people; instead, asking what they had read or written recently or in the previous few weeks provided an adequate picture, especially as many people made very little use of literacy in any form.

I used this interview framework with 22 residents of Mowo who lived in various parts of the village. I had originally had the idea of using the interviews as a way of creating an overview of literacy in the village but this was an unrealistic objective, not least because of the impossibility of defining people as either literate or non-literate. As I commented in Chapter 2 (see page 13) in my critique of the crude classification of people as either literate or illiterate, I rapidly discovered that just as many non-literate people had some basic ability in literacy, irrespective of making use of literacy through mediators, many literate people were less than fully competent. However, in line with my original plan, I made an effort to visit various neighbourhoods rather than concentrate my attention on any particular part of the village. This was to avoid giving any impression of exclusive interest in one part of the village and to give me an opportunity to encounter a wider cross-section of the community.

My interviewees at this time were people whom I met without prior arrangement as Jean Claude and I walked through the village. We often found people sitting in or outside their compounds, perhaps involved in some household activity, and would stop to talk with them, asking them if they would be willing for us to interview them. We generally conducted the interviews immediately and in the open air wherever we met the people concerned, which sometimes attracted the attention of a small crowd of interested children. Each interview lasted about 30 to 40 minutes.

I was keen to interview roughly equal numbers of men and women but only seven out of the twenty two people whom Jean Claude and I met in this way were women, perhaps because women were more likely to be inside their compounds and less visible to the passer-by. All of the women described themselves as non-literate and the responses they gave me about their literacy practices were somewhat similar so, in line with the principle of "saturation" of grounded theory which guided my choice of interviewees (Charmaz and Mitchell 2001, Glaser and Strauss 1967, Strauss and Corbin 1998), I judged that further interviews with women were not likely to reveal fresh insights and I decided not to search out any more women to interview. On the other hand, I realised that none of my interviewees were Muslim. I therefore went to the part of the village where a small number of Mofu Muslims lived in order to meet at least one such person to see if I could identify any distinctive features of their views of literacy. This was in recognition of the principle of "theoretical sampling" of grounded theory which encourages researchers to strengthen their theoretical understanding by searching out data to confirm or challenge their preliminary conclusions.

During the same period of my research, I began to interview a number of people whom I regarded as being of significance in the village and I continued to do this when I returned to the village in 2007. This group, which totalled 14 people, included two of the chiefs of the *quartiers* or neighbourhoods whom I interviewed before any other residents of the village. This was in order to present myself to them and to obtain their approval and support. It was important to adopt this strategy out of respect for their status in the village. It was also in recognition of my belief that they were “gatekeepers” (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995, Hammersley and Atkinson 2007) such that, if they had not approved of my research, other people in the village would have been reluctant to speak to me. I asked them the questions which I intended to ask other people in the village, so that they would be fully aware of what I intended to do. They raised no objection to my continuing with my research.

The content of my interviews with other significant local people depended on their particular role in the village. In order to understand better what was involved in growing cotton, I interviewed one of the staff of the local cotton growers’ association, and, in 2007, I interviewed the leaders of the local savings society so as to explore the significance of this organisation in village life.

### **Literacy Learners and Programme Personnel**

As I wanted to obtain some knowledge of the literacy provision in the area and of the perspective on literacy of people who were involved in these programmes, I also interviewed a number of learners, teachers and organisers. In 2006, I interviewed 15 literacy learners; 13 of these were women and 2 were men, a proportion which reflected the ratios of men and women in the classes I attended, although not necessarily of the programmes as a whole (see page 158). These people were involved in three of the five programmes which were functioning in the area during my fieldwork. In 2007, I interviewed a group of seven women involved in a fourth programme. These interviews were of a semi-structured nature and were designed to explore the literacy practices of the interviewees and particularly their reasons for attending the literacy classes (see Appendix 3).

I also interviewed 12 literacy programme teachers and organisers for the purpose of discovering the structure, content and ethos of each of these programmes which make up the context for organised literacy learning for adults in the area. I discuss these programmes more fully in Chapter 9, Section b.

### **Main Informants**

The interviews I conducted with people in Mowo in 2006 provided me with an overview of the ways in which literacy was used in the community and what local people thought about it but I continued to have many questions about how literacy figured in the lives of individual people. I therefore decided on my return to the village in 2007 to focus on interviewing a smaller number of people in much greater depth and to visit them each on several occasions. This proved to be a particularly valuable strategy, not only because it allowed me to obtain a much clearer picture of life for local people, but also because it gave me an opportunity to explore their perspectives on literacy from different angles. Interviewing each of them six or eight times over a period of five months gave coherence

to their account and revealed consistencies, and sometimes inconsistencies, in their views which would not have become apparent from a single visit. A similar two-level research strategy was adopted by Barton and Hamilton (1998) in their research in Lancaster.

My choice of these three main informants was based on their responsiveness to me and their willingness to discuss literacy related matters when I had interviewed them the previous year, as well as the explicit permission to return to ask them further questions which they had given to me at that time. I had originally intended to select four people, two men and two women, of whom one of each would consider themselves as literate and the other non-literate, but the absence of any literate women in my original group obliged me to reduce my selection to three people. They constitute three case studies within the larger study of the village, although of a weaker kind than that of the study as a whole since they serve a strong illustrative purpose within it (see page 29). I will describe Rosaline, Magerdawa and Gabriel in detail in Chapter 6.

My interviews with them took the form of informal discussions around particular topics which I had chosen in advance. The content of these discussions varied from informant to informant and depended on their personal circumstances and engagement with literacy. For instance, Gabriel, the only one of the three who described himself as literate, frequently wrote letters for other people, a literacy practice which was characteristic of this context, as it is in other places where people are lacking competence either in basic literacy skills or in particular areas of literacy expertise (Baynham and Masing 2000, Jones 2000, Kalman 1999, Malan 1996b, Wagner 1993). Magerdawa was non-literate but held a responsible position as leader of a group of cotton growers, so I was particularly interested in exploring how he handled the literacy demands of his position. Rosaline was a young mother who ran her own small business and her children were attending school.

These were certainly ethnographic interviews as defined by Heyl (see page 36). In them, I attempted to enter into the world of my informants and to allow them to express themselves as they wanted. In this way, my interviewees were more “empowered” in Heyl’s terms than if I had had a structured list of questions, but not as much as would have been possible if I had enlisted them as collaborators in my research, or even as agents of change, as participatory action research aims to do (Kemmis and McTaggart 2000). The lack of a shared language in which we could converse easily also militated against the development of greater levels of empowerment.

### **3.g     *Research Relationships***

I was conscious of the necessity of relating to all my informants in an ethical and professional manner (Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and the Commonwealth 1999, British Association for Applied Linguistics 2006, British Sociological Association 2002), so I took care to introduce myself and the purpose of my research before starting my interviews. For most people, it was sufficient to say that I was studying literacy work with adults, and that I wanted to know how people used reading and writing and what they thought about literacy. A few people asked what use I would make of my research. In answer, I explained that I hoped that it would be a contribution to the literacy programmes in the area and elsewhere.



All the interviewees gave their consent to be interviewed, and all but one agreed to be interviewed again if I wished to see them. In recognition of their assistance, and on the suggestion of Jean Claude, I gave each of my interviewees in Mowo a kilogram bag of salt which would be useful in their food preparation. They seemed to appreciate this.

When I started my detailed interviews with the three main informants in 2007, I first went to see them to explain thoroughly what I had in mind and to obtain their agreement. Each of them agreed so we arranged a regular time and day of the week when we would meet, although this had to be varied occasionally. In view of the substantial amount of time they allowed me, I gave each of them relatively large sums of money (about £40) which they used for various purposes.

I gave all my informants the opportunity to request anonymity in my research report but all of them declined. Indeed, several of them expressed surprise at being asked and specifically requested that their real names should be used.

An important element for assessing the validity of my research concerns the nature of my relationship with my informants, especially in view of the obvious cultural differences between us which may have had an effect on their attitude towards me and the information they gave me. In such circumstances, it is possible that informants might feel reluctant to provide information, or be so eager to be helpful that they provide information which they believe the researcher would like to have, even if this is not an entirely faithful reflection of their own opinions. This was a particularly important issue in my research seeing that it depended heavily on my interviews with local people.

This is a difficulty which is often encountered in ethnographic research, as such research is frequently conducted by researchers whose interest in a particular research site or focus arises precisely from the fact that it is unfamiliar to them. They remain strangers even as they attempt to become friends (Powdermaker 1966). This is especially true when researchers are working outside their own country, but it also comes about through differences of class, gender, or age (Okely and Callaway 1992). In all such research, researchers must exercise reflexivity if they are to be aware of the strengths and weaknesses of their research. This involves recognising the differences between themselves and their informants and being alert to how these might influence their attitude to their research subjects, both individually and collectively, and *vice versa* (Davies 1999).

I believe that I related to my informants in a professional and appropriate manner. It is less easy for me to be sure of their attitude towards me. In any case, I think this varied from person to person. It is evident that I stood out in the community, being a white person and therefore being regarded in some sense as being privileged, and certainly as wealthy compared to the local population. The many people who approached me for financial help is evidence of this. I lived in my colleagues' house which was conspicuous as it was larger than other houses in the village and located in a compound with trees and its own well and water tower. Having a car confirmed my wealth, and it gave further opportunity for local people to ask me for help. At the same time, it enabled me to interact with local people in ways which would not otherwise have been possible. On one occa-

sion, the chief of Mokong asked me to take him to Maroua, and on another I was asked to bring two newborn twins with their mother and aunt back to Mowo from the hospital in Zidim.

There were six other white people in the village, all of whom were working in various professional occupations concerned with the medical centre, the Bible Institute or the language development work. It is likely that many local people regarded me in the same category as them, as highly educated and having a professional career. I did not in any way attempt to distance myself from the other expatriates, as I did not see any need to do this, especially as I doubted that it would have affected the attitude of local people towards me.

I was aware that these differences inevitably introduced a degree of complexity into my relationships with all my informants but it was difficult to find any way of overcoming this in view of the inherent nature of our difference. It was impossible for me to exercise the “strong” form of reflexivity as described by Wasserfall (1997 in Heyl 2001). This occurs when researchers not only recognise the differences between themselves and their informants but actively seek to “deconstruct their own authority” (ibid: 378) by bridging the gap between them. Since this gap was created by my gender and ethnic origin, I could not see any way that this could be overcome. I was inevitably limited to Wasserfall’s “weak” form of reflexivity, that of simply recognising that a differential existed and that it might have a bearing on the data collected.

Some of my informants were aware of my connection with Ken and Judy Hollingsworth who were well known in the village. This was especially helpful when relating to the local chiefs as it enabled them to locate me in relation to someone they knew. However, many of the ordinary people did not know the Hollingsworths well, so this connection had neither a positive nor a negative effect for them.

The nature of my research did not specifically focus on any religious issues. I attended the local church from time to time, so I was identified as a Christian but this did not appear to mark me out, seeing that most of the local people were also Christian. For those who were Muslim, my faith did not appear to create a barrier. The leader of the local Muslims even gave me a letter asking me for financial help.

There is a possibility that my frequent references to religious literacies in this thesis, and especially to reading the Bible, may give rise to some suspicion of bias in view of my personal views and interests, but I believe that this was not the case. As I will explain in Chapters 6 and 7, the Bible occupies an undeniably prominent place in local literacy practice and in the thinking of many people, and it is by far the most commonly available book in the area. Many people spoke to me spontaneously about the important place of the Bible in their thinking about literacy. Researchers elsewhere have noticed the significance of Bible reading in local literacy practices (Kulick and Stroud 1993, Openjuru and Lyster 2007b, Papen 2005b, Reder and Wiklund 1993).

It is likely that I fitted comfortably into the role of researcher in the minds of the local people as they were familiar with this role from the considerable amount of agricultural

and sociological research which has been carried out in the village in the last ten years and more (see footnote on page 51), although it was less usual for a white person to be walking through the village and visiting people in their homes to the extent that I did. Some people initially wondered if I was connected with the national census which had taken place shortly before my arrival in the village but I explained that this was not the case.

All my informants were willing to be interviewed and on the whole most were comfortable for me to ask them questions. This was least true of those who were younger women, especially as it involved being visited by two men, myself and Jean Claude. All interviews were obviously conducted in public view for this reason.

I noticed that there was considerable difference among the informants as to their readiness to be forthcoming in their responses. Some seemed to have difficulty finding answers, others talked at length. This seemed to be more a function of their personality than of the particular questions being asked. Some expressed a certain degree of irritation about the length of their interview, although this only became apparent when I read the transcriptions of the recordings, as Jean Claude did not translate all their comments direct to me at the time.

The major question concerns how the answers which my informants gave me were affected by the particular characteristics of the interviews, including particularly the cultural difference between us, and also perhaps the topic of the conversation. There is no doubt that the outcome of any interview is affected by many factors and that the responses which any person may give may not be the same in other conditions or in other circumstances. As I discussed at the beginning of this section, researchers can only be alert to this inherent problem and, given the impossibility of preventing it, seek to identify at what points their research may be affected by it. A degree of consistency between the answers which these interviewees gave me, such as regarding the value and uses of literacy, cannot necessarily be interpreted as a sign of superficial or less than genuine responses. It may equally be the real expression of what they believed to be true. In any case, not all informants were equally positive about literacy. I also believe that my strategy of developing a deeper relationship with three main informants over a period of time went some way to mitigate this problem.

### ***3.h Use of Interpreters***

For almost all my interviews with local people who were not professionals in some capacity, I had to make use of an interpreter, seeing that my knowledge of Mofu-Gudur was limited and the period of time available for me for fieldwork was too short for me to acquire the necessary level of language proficiency. Although employing an interpreter might be regarded as less than ideal, it is considerably preferable to attempting to conduct research independently without an adequate command of the language. As Trudell found in her research in another part of Cameroon, attempting to elicit information directly from an informant without both parties being sufficiently competent in a shared language can lead to frustration and inadequate or unreliable data (Trudell 2004).

I addressed this issue by employing a person who was recommended to me as having a good level of French and as having had some experience of the role of interpreter. Jean Claude Fandar was a Mofu man aged about 50 who had been one of the first young people in the area to attend secondary school. He had subsequently worked as a teacher and then as a financial officer in a local development project. He had also assisted Daniel Barreteau, a linguistic researcher who had studied the phonology of Mofu-Gudur in the 1980s. He worked with me from the beginning of 2006 for the remainder of my field work, and as such was my principal interpreter, accompanying me when I interviewed local people or travelled around the area to visit literacy classes or for other purposes. In this sense, he was my research assistant and cultural guide as much as my interpreter. I made use of other interpreters only before I employed Jean Claude and on other rare occasions when he was not available.

Jean Claude played an important part in my interviews, and in my research as whole. He was an active participant in the interviews in the sense that he did not simply translate my words and those of the interviewees verbatim. He also took initiative. For instance, when I asked a question which the interviewee clearly did not understand, he repeated the question in different words without my asking him to do so or even being aware that the informant had not understood. When an informant gave an answer which did not make sense to him as a cultural insider, such as regarding the amount of land they farmed, he asked further questions for clarification before explaining to me what they had said, rather than simply translating the first incomplete response which they had given. Similarly, if I asked a question which was too general, he reinterpreted it in more specific terms. Thus, when he translated my rather general question to an interviewee about whether they belonged to a group in the village, he rephrased it more precisely, asking whether they belonged to a group within the cotton growers' association or in their neighbourhood. In this way, he took an active role in eliciting information which I would not have obtained if he had simply translated whatever the interviewee or I had said.

There was, of course, a danger in this. Taking initiative might result in him asking leading questions which would affect negatively on the genuineness of the interviewees' responses. I believe that this occurred from time to time, as when he suggested to one interviewee that being literate could help with obtaining employment or with personal correspondence, but these occasions were not common and usually occurred when I was interviewing someone who was not very forthcoming. When it occurred, I noticed that in any case the interviewee was as likely to reject his suggestion as to accept it.

I became aware of Jean Claude's way of working through reading the transcripts of the interviews. However, at that point it was not always clear whether he was sometimes expanding on the responses of the interviewees to include information which would make them more understandable to me or that he was adding something which was more his opinion than that of the interviewees. Sometimes, it seemed that his opinion was more prominent than that of the interviewee. Occasionally, it appeared from the transcripts that he simply misunderstood either my question or the response the interviewee gave. I believe that allowance needs to be made for the fact that occasionally he had to translate a

lengthy section of an interviewee's speech which it would have been impossible to do with complete accuracy, so some degree of paraphrasing was inevitable.

I discussed his manner of interpreting with him when I realised what he was doing and he agreed that sometimes he had to take an active part in interviews so as to ensure that the interviewees provided useful and comprehensible information. He did not believe that he had affected the balance of what the interviewees had said. I consider that any negative effect of such mistranslations was somewhat reduced by the considerable quantity of useful data which the interviews generated, and I have no doubt that he was an effective and valuable help in my interviews.

Jean Claude also had a very important role as my research assistant and gave me much useful information about the Mofu community. His only limitation, as far as I was aware, was that as a Catholic he was not very conversant with the religious terminology used by my interviewees who were members of Protestant churches. Thus, he tended to use the Catholic word "mass" for the Sunday services in the Baptist church. On many occasions, he gave me advice as to how to proceed with my research. He suggested for instance, that it would be better for me to visit people for interviews in the mornings when they were most likely to be at home rather than later when they might have gone out. In addition, I had initially intended to concentrate my local interviews on people in the neighbouring village of Mokong, but he advised against this on the grounds that many Muslims were living there and that they might be reluctant to be seen to engage too closely with me as a white Christian. Ken and Judy Hollingsworth agreed with his opinion, so I decided to move my focus of attention to Mowo. This proved to be a very satisfactory choice, not least because I could easily go on foot to meet my informants whenever my car was being repaired. In reality, I did not encounter any animosity or reticence in my interaction with Muslims in Mowo or elsewhere. As I mentioned above (see page 31), I always tried to crosscheck the information Jean Claude gave me, as I did with information from other people, so as to reduce the risk of personal bias or simply insufficient knowledge.

I do not feel that he was too directive and, at times, I would have liked him to have expressed his opinion about what I was doing earlier than he did. This was particularly true in connection with my choice of one of the three main informants who, as I later discovered, was not in entirely good standing in the village (see page 107).

### ***3.i Recording and Transcription***

I took notes by hand during all my interviews and, with the permission of my interviewees, which was never withheld, I recorded all but 5 of the 80 interviews. These exceptions were usually the result of forgetting to take my recorder with me or failing to turn it on or off correctly. On these occasions, my notes had to serve as a record of the key points of the interview.

I found that recording the interviews was an extremely productive tool of my research. I used a simple MP3 player recorder with an in-built microphone. This had the advantage of being compact and easily portable but the disadvantage of detecting not only the voices of the participants in the interview but also all the ambient sounds, including passing traf-

fic, cocks crowing or children walking across gravel nearby. It was also sensitive to the sound of wind but I reduced this problem by wrapping it in a thin layer of cloth. Occasionally, the recording of what was said was obscured by these extraneous noises but overall it was adequate for my purposes, especially once I had enhanced the recordings electronically to make it easier to distinguish the voices.

All the recordings of the interviews which I conducted in 2006 were transcribed in their entirety. In view of my limited Mofu, and also to make efficient use of time, I employed two assistants for this purpose, Haman Jean-Paul and Daringawa Dominique, who were both able to read and write French and Mofu well. They were not familiar with typing or computers so I had to spend some considerable amount of time training them but this proved to be a good investment as they were eventually able to work independently, so that I could leave them to work while I went out interviewing with Jean Claude. I had originally assumed that they would be able to transcribe directly onto a computer but this proved to be unrealistic seeing that very few Mofu people have any experience of computers. They therefore divided the task, with Jean-Paul listening to each recording on a computer and transcribing it by hand into an exercise book, and Daringawa keyboarding each transcription when it was complete.

It took about three or four days to transcribe each interview, with the result that not all the transcriptions of the first phase of interviews were finished by the time I left the village in April 2006. However, Ken Hollingsworth kindly agreed to supervise my research assistants and to send their keyboarded transcriptions to me in the UK by email. This made it possible for me to read them through to check for errors and complete the initial analysis of them before returning for the second phase of my research. On my return, I went through the transcriptions with Jean Claude and discussed with him any issues which arose so that he could clarify what had been said or provide me with further background information. Such checking proved to be very useful even though many months had elapsed since the original interviews had taken place.

For the second phase of my research in 2007, I adopted a different strategy. This was necessary because of the slow pace of the transcribing in the previous year and also the considerable expense of employing Jean-Paul and Daringawa. I consequently asked them to transcribe only certain parts of the interviews with my three main informants which I chose on the basis of what I judged to be the most interesting for my purposes. One of these, for instance, related to the role of one of the informants, Gabriel, as a literacy mediator (see page 110). Instead of relying on a full transcription, I listened to the recording of each interview with Jean Claude on the same or the following day, and made extensive notes in order to have an accurate and clear record of what my informants had said. This had the advantage of immediacy, as there was no delay in examining what the informants had told me, so smaller details were less likely to be overlooked. It also enabled me to be fully aware of what the informants had told me in each interview so as to prepare for my next meeting with them and raise follow-up questions with them as necessary.

### **3.j Analysis**

The hand-written data in my notes and the interview transcriptions were transferred as soon as possible to my computer, where I also recorded my observations and impressions of local life each day directly in a journal. This rendered the data more accessible for analysis but it also marked the first stage in my analysis as I reflected on each item and added comments or questions to guide my further explorations. As my research progressed, the analysis of my data developed in depth and complexity. My initial categories tended to be somewhat descriptive and tied directly to the information I obtained, such as “cotton growing” and “local publications”. As my engagement with my data increased, I found it helpful to develop more interpretative codes such as “literacy and lack of confidentiality” and “responsiveness of literacy programmes to local conditions”. Eventually, I subdivided some of these categories in order to identify the source of each piece of data, whether a person discussing their own experience, or someone talking in general terms about other people. As I became more aware of the significance of religion on people’s understandings of literacy, I also subdivided categories to identify the religious affiliation of each informant. In addition, I found it helpful to identify in my data the specific language which my informants were referring to when they were talking about literacy since this was also significant.

Following the methodology of grounded theory, I analysed each item of data as soon as possible after I had collected it. Often this was immediately after storing it on my computer. In the case of my journals, I tended to look at them as soon as time allowed after the end of each month. At various times, I wrote memos or “analytical notes” (Hammerley and Atkinson 2007: 150) in which I reflected on various aspects of my data up to that point. It was not easy to keep my analysis of the data in pace with its collection so the interval between the two main phases of my research gave me a welcome opportunity to review all the analysis which I had done up to that point. Similarly, after returning from Cameroon for the last time in 2007, I went through a lengthy process of reviewing my data in its entirety, refining and developing my categories in line with my understanding. This process involved firstly rereading all my data sequentially and then rereading all the data within each category. As a result, some data was reassigned to other categories which more accurately described its content, some categories were seen to be redundant and were deleted, and a number of new categories were developed, some amalgamating small amounts of data from previous categories.

### **3.k Conclusion**

Throughout my research, I have been involved in a process of exploration, not always being clear of my way forward. It has also been a creative process (Clifford and Marcus 1986), involving shaping and reshaping, as I have attempted to arrive at a coherent understanding of literacy from the perspective of Mofu people. The product of my research is inevitably a reflection of my own interests and ideas but it is my hope that it also accurately reflects the views of the people with whom I interacted and that in the end it is their voice which speaks most clearly in this thesis.

I believe that my residence in Mowo and the interaction which I had with local people has given me a good insight into their conditions of life and, particularly, into how literacy is understood in the community. On the basis of the evidence described in this chapter, I believe that the quality of my data is sufficient to provide a valid foundation for the conclusions which I have drawn from my research.



## 4. A Village in Northern Cameroon

This chapter focuses on Mowo, the location of my research. It is the immediate context in which the people of the village live their lives and, as such, it has an important bearing on their understandings of literacy.

After describing the appearance of the village, I will outline the main features of the life of the local population. I will emphasise their overall low socio-economic status and the significant changes which have taken place in recent years, and which continue to take place, affecting their lives in many ways. This will be set in the context of a brief description of the origins and history of the Mofu-Gudur people and area, of which Mowo is a part. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of the response of the people of the village to the changes which affect them.

### 4.a *Mowo village*

Mowo is situated in the Far North Province of Cameroon and is one of about 24 villages spread over some 190 square miles where Mofu-Gudur is the dominant language, spoken by all those who are native to the area. It is a small corner of a large country since Cameroon, with a total area of more than 180,000 square miles, is almost twice the size of the United Kingdom (Philip's World Reference Atlas 2005).

Mowo is located where the plain ends and the mountains begin. To the east, there is hardly a hill for 75 miles to the border with Chad and beyond (see Fig 1, page 50). To the west, at the edge of the village, lie the first summits in the Mandara Mountains which rise up abruptly, forming what from a distance appears to be an impenetrable wall running roughly northeast to southwest. Closer inspection shows that, although their sides are extremely steep and difficult to climb, many of them are more or less surrounded by stretches of level land. The frontier between Cameroon and Nigeria lies in these mountains, some 40 miles away.

There isn't much to Mowo. In fact, unwitting visitors approaching on the main road which leads from Maroua, the provincial capital, to Mokolo, the principal town of the *département* of Mayo-Tsanaga, may well pass through Mowo without realising that they have done so. There is no sign to indicate where the village begins or ends and the clusters of mud houses beside the road are no different from many similar clusters already passed. In fact, the few signs beside the road suggest that this is already Mokong, the next village. One sign points to the credit union, the *Caisse Mutuelle d'Epargne et de Crédit de Mokong*. Another, next to it, points to the office of the health savings society, the *Mutuelle de Santé de Mokong*. Further on, after going through open fields, the road passes a white church and a concentration of buildings on the left hand side. The board outside indicates the Bible Institute, the *Institut Biblique Mokong*. Soon afterwards, another announces the Baptist medical centre, but at the bottom is written "Mokong" in large red letters. Mowo is, to all intents and purposes, invisible.

The road leaves the houses and buildings behind and continues for three quarters of a mile through an uninhabited open space before reaching more clusters of houses. Eventually an official road sign announces the village of Mokong. Unwary visitors looking for Mowo have to turn round and go back. Only if they look carefully will they find the battered and faded sign outside the church which they had passed earlier, on which they may be able to make out *Eglise de Mowo*. They had passed through Mowo without realising it.



**Figure 1: Mowo Centre, looking east**

Mowo is less well known than Mokong, its neighbour. Perhaps this is because Mokong is recognised by the government as the principal village in the canton to which it has given its name. Mokong is where the lamido, the administrative head of the canton, has his palace. Mowo only has a lawan or sub-chief whose house is hardly different from any others in the village. Nor does Mowo have a major market, unlike Mokong, which attracts many hundreds of customers each Sunday. Mowo is just an ordinary, inconspicuous village. If the various organisations and institutions which exist in Mowo have chosen to describe themselves as belonging to Mokong, it is in an effort to identify themselves with a well-known place, or because, like the savings groups, they have members from many different villages and so belong in a sense to the canton of Mokong as a whole.

### **Population**

It is not easy to be sure of the population of Mowo, as the official figures from the nation census carried out in 2005 have not yet been released. The only relevant census figures which I obtained from the *sous-préfet* in Mokolo date from the 1987 census which state that the population of the whole Mokong canton was 30,350. Village level statistics were not available.

An alternative official source, the electoral register for Mowo, which was used for the national presidential elections in 2004, lists 499 names. These are all adults who are officially over the age of 21, even if the widespread uncertainty about age in this area means that this is not a sharply defined category. Unofficial figures for 2007, obtained from the UNDP, a major political party, indicate 551 names on the register.

It has to be recognised that this is only an approximate guide to the total population. Firstly, not all adults choose to register to vote. This is particularly true of women more than men. Nor do these figures include people who belong to Mowo but who were away from the village when the registers were completed. It is therefore difficult to make an informed estimate of this number with any degree of accuracy. Similarly, an estimate of the total population needs to make allowance for the number of children in the village. This depends on knowing how many adults are parents with children and how many children are in the average family. Frosio (2000) suggests a total population of 1,700 in 1996. Mathieu *et al* (2007) offer a figure of 1,500 people in 2000 with an annual population growth of 3.7%. Based on this evidence, it seems reasonable to assume that the total population of Mowo is now in the region of 2,000 people<sup>3</sup>.

### **The Village *Quartiers***

If the population of the village is uncertain, the boundaries are somewhat clearer (see map, page 187). On the eastern side, the village begins where the houses start; this is not only the boundary of the village but also the boundary between the cantons of Mokong and Boula. On the western side, the village ends where the road skirts the mountain which separates Mowo from Mokong. The northern boundary lies along the line of the two seasonal rivers, the Mayo Tsanaga and its tributary, the Mayo Zoubara, and the southern somewhere in the open countryside beyond the last houses.

The centre of the village is dominated by two small mountains which rise sharply from the plain, separated from each other by a narrow passage. Although their summits are only some 150 feet above the village, so that they hardly qualify to be called mountains and they can in no way compare with the mountain on the western edge of the village which rises about 1,000 feet above the plain, their steep sides and bare rock faces make this an appropriate name. They seem to be composed of massive boulders piled one on top of another. Apart from these outcrops, the whole village lies on more or less level land.

The village consists of five distinct *quartiers* or neighbourhoods. Passing visitors may only be aware of the houses on each side of the main road. These constitute the first of these *quartiers* which is known as “Mowo Centre” or “Mowo II”. This is the principal *quartier* of the village where many people live and where the houses have been built most

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<sup>3</sup> These estimates of the population and other detailed information concerning agriculture in the village (below) have been drawn from ongoing research by PRASAC (*Pôle Régional de Recherche Appliquée au Développement des Savanes d’Afrique Centrale*), a project supported by the Cameroonian government, which has selected Mowo as a special research site representative of settlements in mountain foothill areas. This research has provided invaluable information on the village and the conditions of life of the people in Mowo.

closely together. It has developed greatly in recent times thanks to the road and the traffic on it. The market place of the village is located at the edge of this *quartier* at the foot of the eastern mountain. There are no shops here. Instead, some small stalls selling meat and household necessities are set up by local people for a few hours on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. These are also social times when people relax over a glass of millet beer. The market is usually very small. For food, clothing and other items, most people in Mowo go to the markets in Mokong on Sundays or in the village of Cembey on the other side of the mayo on Wednesdays.

On the north side of the main road, between the mountain and the mayo is a cluster of houses known as “Mowo I” or Bangal, the original centre of the village before the road was built. Further west, and also close to the mayo is Milambang, whose main features are the primary school and the compound of Ken and Judy Hollingsworth, the SIL linguists from the USA who have been working in the village since 1978 on linguistic research and language development.

To the south of the main road is Sigodam, stretching out over the plain. From the main road, the flat terrain and the few trees conceal the large number of houses which have been built here, and it is only on foot that one appreciates its extent. Beyond is a small cluster of houses at Ribidis on the edge of the village.

To the west is the last of the five *quartiers*, known as Hardé, a group of some 15 compounds behind the Bible Institute and the medical centre. Most of the employees of these two institutions live here. The main electricity line to Mokolo passes through this *quartier* and provides power to the Institute and the medical centre and to some of the staff houses. These institutions are very prominent and responsible for bringing to Mowo many people who would not otherwise have come, such as the students of the Institute and the patients of the medical centre, together with the staff. As such, they are a distinct social and cultural entity, not fully integrated into the rest of the village.

In all the *quartiers*, except for Hardé, there is a mixture of traditional and more modern styles of housing. The traditional homes consist of a compound of four or five small round huts made of mud with grass roofs, and surrounded by a mud wall which serves to keep the animals in at night. When the huts are built, layers of mud are laid progressively one on top of another and allowed to dry, and finally a conical roof made of dried grass is placed on top. Others, belonging to people who have been able to afford a more expensive style, are rectangular with walls made of mud bricks. These are roofed with corrugated sheets, which have no doubt dictated the rectangular shape of the structure. A few more substantial houses stand out as they are built with concrete blocks faced with a coating of cement. These are big enough to be divided internally into more than one room. They have been built by people with more resources than most. Most of the more solid houses of this type are in Hardé where the salaries of the medical staff have permitted this sort of construction.

Around these five *quartiers* lies open countryside, given over to farming wherever the soil is sufficiently fertile. In most areas, fields are not defined by hedges or other markers

but their location is known to those who work them. Small shrubs and isolated trees are dotted around. Only close to the mayo is there what could be termed a wood or small forest, an area which has been left untouched as it is held to be sacred by those who practise traditional religion.

Not all the land can be cultivated. On the edge of Milambang, near the burial ground of the village chiefs, the soil is almost devoid of any vegetation. On the opposite side of the main road, towards the big mountain, are the remains of the depot used by the construction company which built the road twenty years ago, with the remains of a loading ramp and patches of tarmac still visible.

### **Living off the Land**

Mowo is a rural village where almost all of the population are subsistence farmers, growing their own food and selling some of it to obtain whatever cash they need for the ordinary expenses of life. Typically, people grow millet, which is ground into flour to make millet *boule*, the staple diet, and peanuts. Some people whose fields are suitable grow maize, green vegetables or tomatoes. Those who have fields near the mayo, where there is easiest access to water, may grow rice in the rainy season, and some who are able to afford petrol-powered pumps for irrigation grow onions in the dry season. Many people also grow cotton as an exclusively cash crop and sell it to Sodecoton, the national cotton company.

Apart from selling the produce of their fields, many families obtain cash by rearing a few chicken or goats; these may serve for food but are more generally intended for sale. Cash is also obtained by petty trading, or occasional labouring for those who can afford to pay others to work for them.

Farming however does not normally produce a high standard of living, and Mowo is no exception. Growing enough food is difficult for various reasons, not the least of which is the low fertility of the sandy soil of this area. In addition, the climate presents many challenges. Irrigation is not a viable option for most farmers, so they are dependent on natural rainfall. Like the rest of this part of Africa, the Mowo area has two distinct seasons, and rain falls only between May and September. This is the period of intense activity in the fields, involving clearing, ploughing, sowing, weeding and eventually harvesting. This is also the time when many people have already exhausted their supply of food grown in the previous year, so it is commonly a time of hunger as well as hard work. Only after the harvest is completed in October and November do people have enough food to eat. During the dry season, between harvest and the beginning of the next rainy season, the demands of farming are much reduced if not non-existent.

The vagaries of the climate make farming an unpredictable occupation. An inadequate amount of rain affects both the germination of the millet seeds and their growth, and reduces the final yield. Too much rain has a similar effect and flash floods sometimes lead to crops being destroyed, with the additional problem of infertile sand being deposited on the good soil. The amount and timing of the rainfall are crucial; a successful harvest de-

depends on a heavy rain at the start of the wet season followed by sufficient rain to keep the soil moist. This cannot be relied upon every year.

According to the National Household Survey of Cameroon conducted in 2001 in a representative sample of households, 52.8% of the population of the mountainous area in the *départements* of Mayo Tsanaga, Mayo Sava and Diamaré live below the poverty line, having an income of less than 232,547cfa (£247.08) per year. In the Far North Province as a whole, almost 60% of households headed by a farmer live below this level (Government of Cameroon 2002).

#### **4.b    *A Context of Change***

In this section, I will outline some of the main features of the changes which have affected and continue to affect the people of this part of Cameroon and in particular of the village of Mowo, focusing primarily on the changes which have occurred in the lifetimes of the present inhabitants. I will begin by setting the scene with a brief historical perspective on the major developments which have taken place up to the mid to late 20th century. This will be followed by a more detailed discussion of the changes which have had an impact on the lives of ordinary people in Mowo in the last forty years and, lastly, by an outline of the changes which are occurring at the present time, or can be anticipated in the very near future. This section will end with a discussion of the reactions of the local people to these changes.

##### **Change before 1960**

The changes evident at the present time are the contemporary manifestation of a process which has been taking place for centuries.

The village of Mowo has probably existed for at least 400 years. In its early years, it was a place of some importance located, as it still is, on a main access route from the plains into the mountains, but it came to be eclipsed by the nearby village of Gudur. Towards the end of the 18th century, major social and political changes took place across the whole area as the inhabitants of the Mandara Mountains found themselves the objects of the aggression, firstly of the Wandala kingdom from the north, and then of the Fulbe from the east who made frequent raids from the plain into the mountains for the purpose of obtaining slaves. The Fulbe were not only ethnically and linguistically very distinct from the mountain people but also religiously different in that they had adopted Islam. They regarded themselves as superior to the mountain people who in turn regarded themselves as inferior, an attitude which has not entirely disappeared at the present time. They posed a particular threat as they attacked on horseback, so the local people found that their best defence lay in abandoning their settlements at the foot of the mountains and establishing themselves on the small plateaux high up on the mountain tops.

The opening of the area to a wider world began at the beginning of the 20th century when the Mandara Mountains came under the influence of powers from much further afield. White people arrived in the north of Cameroon for the first time with Germany asserting its authority after defeating Fulbe forces in a battle near Maroua in 1902.

Following the creation of the French mandate after the First World War (see page 9), the Mofu area was gradually integrated into a larger administrative entity. French control brought a greater degree of law and order than had existed previously and as defensive measures against attack from neighbouring villages and elsewhere became less necessary, the settlements which had been established on the mountains were abandoned and villages created on the plain. For the authorities, this had the advantage of enabling them to control the local populations more easily. For the mountain people, it brought them into closer contact with the administrative authorities, and exposed them all the more to their literacy and literacy practices.

The village of Mowo now finds itself at the bottom of a multi-layered administrative hierarchy. It is located in the *canton* of Mokong, which is in the *arrondissement* of Mokolo, which in turn is part of the larger *département* of Mayo-Tsanaga, one of the six *départements* of the Far North Province. Only minor official business can be conducted at canton level, so residents of Mowo sometimes need to travel outside the Mofu-Gudur area to Mokolo or Maroua. Visiting both places necessitates speaking, and possibly reading and writing, languages other than their own.

As can be seen from this brief historical survey, the horizons of Mowo have become steadily wider as the influences affecting the people of this village have come from further and further afield. Those influences have coalesced into a steady and continuous force. There is now no doubt whatever that Mowo is part of a much wider world.

### **Change since 1960**

The residents of Mowo who were born around the time of national independence in 1960 have experienced fundamental changes in many areas of their lives. Some of the changes have brought new opportunities, others have brought new challenges. Some have involved literacy practices which have done much to bring literacy closer to the ordinary lived experience of the people of the village and to raise the profile of literacy in the community. In this section, I will discuss some of the most significant of these changes.

One of the major changes is that the horizons of the village now extend much further than before. On 25th February 2007, some 60 professional cyclists from Cameroon and other countries in Africa including Senegal, Egypt and Burundi, not to mention others from France, the Netherlands and even Australia raced along the main road through Mowo, followed by a cavalcade of support vehicles. This was the second stage of the *Tour du Cameroun* cycle race which each year starts in Mokong and takes the riders up to Mokolo in the mountains before returning through Mokong and Mowo to Maroua. For a few hours once a year, the link between this small village in Cameroon and the world outside its immediate limits, even with the other side of the globe, takes on a sporting form.

Much has changed in the life of Mowo in the half century since independence. In some ways, life is easier than it was. The main road through the village was surfaced in 1985, making travelling in the many minibuses which provide the local transport both more comfortable and more rapid than it had been before. The road also facilitates trade, making it easier for local produce to be taken from the village for sale and for traders to come

to the village with their goods. The road is well maintained so that drivers can speed along without having to be wary of potholes. Life is easier at home as well, since women no longer have to grind millet into flour by hand, pushing and pulling one heavy stone over another one. Instead, they take their millet to one of at least three electrically powered mills which now serve the village, all located close to the main electricity line in Hardé *quartier*. Farming has become easier too, at least for those who own donkeys or oxen which are useful for ploughing and for carrying or pulling loads.

On the other hand, there are many challenges, particularly to do with the rising cost of living and the increasing insecurity in the food supply. Few people are not affected by the annual shortage of food while waiting for the year's crops to be ready for harvest.

### ***Shortage of Land***

As has been noted above, subsistence agriculture is the main occupation of the people of Mowo. Each family farms the fields which have been inherited from their parents whose land has been divided among their male children when they have died. Over time, as the population of the village has increased, the amount of land available to each family has decreased so that now each family cultivates on average about six acres. I have not been able to find out how much land a typical family might need in order to provide their annual food consumption, but the available literature, as well as comments from my interviewees and others, make clear that the acreage which families currently farm is insufficient (Frosio 2000, Government of Cameroon 2002).

No more land is now available for farming. Apart from the small sacred area on the bank of the mayo, all the bush land which existed around the village a century ago has been cut down and turned over to cultivation. The land is also farmed more intensively. For the past 15 or 20 years, farmers have stopped letting their fields lie fallow in certain years. They continue to rotate their crops but many people believe that the fertility of their fields is falling and Yougouda, the technical adviser of the cotton farmers, told me that some land in the village was no longer fit for cultivation at all. The land has reached, and exceeded, the limits of its ability to support the population (Iyébi-Mandjeck and Seignebos 1995).

The loss of woodland has been accompanied by the disappearance of native fauna which in the past provided an alternative source of food. Koura Abakatakwa, the oldest man in the village, recalls hunting for gazelle, antelope, zebra and wart hog when he was young but all these have now disappeared. A few monkeys still live on the big mountain above the village and sometimes cause damage to the crops on the plain but hunting is no longer an alternative to agriculture as a source of food.

The lack of land has affected everyone but some families are better placed than others. Certain people whose families have lived in Mowo for generations have more fields than others, possibly because their predecessors acquired large amounts of land when there was plenty available. Their fields are often located close to the village centre. Others have much less land and some have little or none at all, so they have to rely on renting fields for a year or longer at a time.



Many of the people whom I interviewed rent at least some fields. This is their only means of having enough land to cultivate. Renting however brings its disadvantages, one of which is that it may not be possible to rent fields which are conveniently located. When fields are dispersed over a wide area, there are implications for the type of crops which can be grown. People who have no transport to reach a field easily are unable to grow crops such as cotton which require a lot of attention, even if the soil would be suitable. This was a problem faced by Rosaline, one of my main informants. She and her husband have fields more than two miles apart, in opposite directions away from their home.

The demand for land has led to rising prices both for renting and purchase. A good field of a quarter of a hectare (0.6 acres) may cost 10,000cfa (£10.60) or more to rent for a year and there are frequent complaints that fields are becoming too expensive. There is much competition, particularly for land which is fertile. It is not uncommon for people who have rented a field in previous years, and even begun to work the field and sow their crops, to have the field taken from them by the owner and given to another person who has offered a higher price. The agreement to rent is entirely verbal and is not supported by written documents. The absence of written documents may contribute to such conflicts. Nor are there title deeds confirming the ownership of land. Most fields are not laid out in a regular manner and their limits are not clearly marked so people commonly accuse one another of encroaching on what they consider to be theirs, perhaps rushing to sow their seeds as early as possible in order to stake a claim. Magerdawa, another of my main informants, told me that he had recently had a dispute with the person farming land next to his and he was pessimistic that he could do anything to resolve it.

The final arbitration in these disputes lies outside the village at the level of the cantonal chief in Mokong or with the *sous-préfet* in Mokolo since land is considered to belong ultimately to the government and it is for the local representatives of the government to assign it as they consider appropriate. This is not always on the basis of long-standing occupation.

### ***Climatic Challenges***

The difficulties facing farmers are aggravated by changing climatic conditions. Koura Abakatakwa told me that water used to run all year round in the two mayos on the north side of the village and it was possible to fish in them. This was confirmed by Jean Claude Fandar, my interpreter, who remembered that when he was at school in Mokong in the 1960s water flowed in the mayo throughout the year. At that time, the mayos could properly have been called “rivers”. Their courses are about 100 yards wide but now during the dry season their beds are completely dry so that it is possible to walk across at any point. Only the loose sand presents any difficulty; crossing the mayo is like walking on a beach. In places a small pool of semi-stagnant water may be found, otherwise people dig holes to find a little water several feet below the surface (see Fig 2, page 58). Even during the rainy season, the mayos are filled with water only after a heavy rainstorm, and then for just a few hours before they become dry again. Fishing is impossible.



**Figure 2: Fetching water near the mayo**

In spite of the lack of water flowing in the mayos, water is nevertheless more accessible close to them than at the foot of the mountain. People living in Ribidis on the southern end of Mowo are particularly badly affected and some, like Moussa Baydam, another interviewee, have already moved to live in Milambang so that they can be nearer to the mayo. Ribidis is a declining cluster of houses because of the increasingly severe problem of lack of water.

There is no official meteorological station at Mowo but weather recordings from other sites in the Far North Province show that the average annual rainfall between 1970 and 1995 was less than the average rainfall in the previous 25 years (L'Hôte 2000). The amount of reduction varies from one weather station to another and among the stations nearest to Mowo does not exceed 10%. It is not certain whether this in itself would be sufficient to account for the reduced availability of water for the population, although the succession of years of reduced rainfall may have had a cumulative effect. It is possible also that the increasing population and more intensive farming methods have resulted in a greater demand for water and contributed towards the current shortage. For instance, the cultivation of onions in the dry season relies entirely on irrigation involving the extraction of water from wells and holes dug for the purpose. Ken Hollingsworth, the linguist resident in the village, has had to increase the depth of the well in his compound so that it does not run dry during the year.

The rainfall in Mowo is less than in the past. It is also unpredictable from one year to another. According to Barreteau (1988), in the six years between 1974 and 1979 the minimum annual rainfall recorded at the Catholic Mission in Mokong was 735mm and the maximum 1006mm. In 1977, 26% less rain fell than in the previous year. This was

followed in 1978 by an increase of 35% in the year's rainfall compared with the year before. Such variation is not untypical and seems to have continued in recent years. The unpredictable rainfall makes farming difficult and seriously affects the yield of the crops.

### ***Rising Cost of Living***

Farming is important both as a source of food and as a source of income since surplus crops can be sold for cash. Such is the need for money that sometimes people sell their crops even when they know that they do not have enough to last them the year, hoping that they will be able to manage for food in some way later on. Money is needed for many purposes. The cost of renting land for farming has already been mentioned. Foodstuffs which people have not grown for themselves, such as onions or tomatoes, have to be bought if and when they are needed. When a family has eaten all their year's supply of millet, they have to buy more, unless they are helped by relatives or friends. Sugar and salt have to be bought in any case, as do clothes, either ready made or made up by a local tailor from cloth bought in the market. Taxes have to be paid, as well as fees for children attending school. Then there are the costs of medical treatment at the medical centre or from a traditional healer. Added to this are the normal expenses involved in maintaining one's home, or buying cooking pots, dishes or other household equipment.



**Figure 3: Ploughing**

Money is needed for things which are desirable as well as those which are absolutely essential. It seemed to me that the people in my study aspired to own a bicycle since this would make it easier to get around and to carry loads. I noticed that several people who had employment used their income to buy themselves a bicycle. A greater priority, and one expressed explicitly to me by a number of other people, is to own a donkey and a plough since these make it possible to prepare fields before sowing better than can be done by hand, with the result that the yields are higher. Owning a donkey also enables a

family to farm more land, as the work is easier and quicker (see Fig 3, above). Gabriel, the third of my main informants, was very grateful for the donkey which he bought with money I gave him in recognition of the help he gave me and I was subsequently asked by several other people if I would help them in a similar way.

A popular source of cash for many people, in addition to selling surplus produce, is growing cotton for sale to the national cotton company, Sodecoton. Cotton is a major industry in the north of Cameroon where climatic conditions are generally favourable to this crop, even if not as favourable as in mid latitude regions further north where longer daylight hours promote better growth in the cotton plants (Porter 1995). Cotton has been grown traditionally for centuries in this part of Africa but its cultivation on an industrial scale, aimed at supplying the demand for cotton in Europe, was actively developed by the French colonial authorities from the early 1950s.

From the point of view of the growers in Mowo and throughout the north of Cameroon, cotton offers the advantage of being a reliable source of income in contrast to the varying price obtainable for other foodstuffs at different times of the year (Roupsard 2000). Unfortunately, its reliability as an income is not matched by its profitability, at least not for most cotton growers. At the end of the 2006 growing season, the average net income for cotton producers in the village as recorded on the final *Synthèse des Montants Dus aux Cercles de Caution* was only 23,138 cfa (£24.60). This did not appear to me to be enough for the farmers in my study to buy the food which they might have grown if they had used their fields for millet instead of cotton and it certainly involved a great deal more effort than growing millet. Some people have been able to address this issue at least in part by growing dry season millet on land south of the village which is suitable for this crop because of its ability to retain water after the annual rains have stopped but most people have not been able to adopt this strategy (Mathieu *et al.* 2007).

Opinions in the village vary as to whether cotton remains a worthwhile crop to grow. Jean Paul who works as an agricultural advisor for the Catholic Development Committee told me that he advises people against it in view of the low returns in relation to the effort involved. Some people, such as Malay Etienne, who worked for me as a cleaner, have concluded that it is not worthwhile and have given it up. Others, however, seem to be willing to continue in the hope that before long they will get a good return. For people with few other sources of income, their reluctance to give up cotton is understandable.

### ***Rural Exodus***

Life is difficult in Mowo. It is hard to grow enough food to eat and it is hard to find the money which is needed for unavoidable expenses. There is very little employment available for local people in the village. Jobs at the Bible Institute and the medical centre mostly require professional qualifications which people in Mowo do not have. Only a few local people are employed in unskilled capacities such as gardeners or guards. A handful have found work as cooks or domestics for the expatriate residents of the village and some gain a small income as teaching assistants at the primary school or in adult literacy classes. Others work for eight months of the year as advisers or supervisors in the local cotton organisation. For most people, some money can be obtained through growing cot-

ton or by petty trading or buying chicken or goats when they are small and fattening them. Cutting and selling wood for cooking or grass for roofing is another possibility for earning a little money.

For this reason, a large number of people from Mowo, particularly men, search for work elsewhere. In the dry season, some are able to find agricultural work on the plain where the soil is suitable for the cultivation of a variety of millet which thrives in dry conditions. However, this work is becoming less available because of the arrival of people from Chad who are willing to work for lower wages. Other young men go to Maroua to work as moto-taxi riders (Frosio 2000). Many go further afield to the major cities of Cameroon such as Garoua, Ngaoundéré, Yaoundé and Douala where they work as street traders or in other unskilled capacities. Mofu-Gudur people in general have a dominant position in the trade in second hand shoes in Yaoundé and Douala. The two brothers of Magerdawa were engaged in this business in Yaoundé, and Gabriel had tried his hand at it when younger. He had subsequently moved to Ngaoundéré where he had worked in a roadside restaurant for a while. Others work as labourers on the sugar cane plantations in the south of the country. It is impossible to know how many Mofu-Gudur people are working away at any one time but it seems that significant numbers are involved. Mofu cultural associations have been established in all the major cities and I was told by Amos, the president of the Mofu translation committee in Yaoundé, that 800 people were present at a recent meeting in the city (PD 37: 13). Some of these would be Mofu people settled in Yaoundé, others would be temporary residents. Some at least would have come from Mowo since many families in the village have younger members who are working in the capital.

Mowo has been affected by the ebb and flow of the national economy. After independence and until the late 1980s, those who found work outside of the home area often did well for themselves. They were able to send money back to their families, and, if they did very well, to build a larger house in Mowo and settle back in the village. The crisis in the economy and the devaluation of the Cameroonian franc in 1994 resulted in many men from Mowo being no longer able to survive in the cities. They returned home, causing a large increase in the population. Frosio (2000) estimates that the population of the village rose by 25% between 1992 and 1998. This reverse exodus placed even greater pressure on the available land and Jean Claude, my interpreter, was sure that theft, robbery and assault had increased at that time as young people who were not used to working the land resorted to other means to obtain money. Although the national economy has begun to improve, prospects for Mofu people remain very limited.

### ***Religious Changes***

Just as there have been major changes in agriculture and in the economy in the last 50 years, so there has been a major change in the religious practices of the area. During the time of colonial control by France, the traditional religion centred on sacrifices to the ancestors was dominant in Mowo and the surrounding mountain area. Among the people of the plains, however, Islam was pre-eminent and, when chiefs were established by the French administration, many of them chose to adopt the Muslim religion and practices, modelling themselves on the Fulbe lamidos and lawans and adopting these Fulbe words as titles. Islam has not, however, had a widespread impact on the village or the wider

mountain area, so the Islamisation of the chiefs has led to the curious situation whereby almost all of the local administrators practise a religion different from that of the general population. This is true of the chief of Mowo, although not true of the quartier chiefs. A small mosque has been built beside the main road in the village and about 100 adults and children practise Islam, as I was told by Hamidou, the *malloum* or leader, who comes from another Mofu village.

A greater impact on the village occurred with the arrival of Christianity. Before independence, the French authorities adopted a secular policy and did not seek to change the existing religious identity of the country but Christian missionary work nevertheless took place. Lutherans, Baptists and Catholics from Europe and America founded churches in various places throughout the Far North. After independence, Christian work remained difficult during the presidency of Ahmadou Ahidjo, a Muslim who actively promoted Islam, but became easier once he was succeeded in 1982 by Paul Biya, a Christian from the south of the country (Seignebos and Nassourou 2000).



**Figure 4: Mowo Baptist Church**

In Mowo, the European Baptist Mission established a presence in the early 1960s, soon after a Catholic Mission at Mokong. This was the first time that white people had taken up residence in the village. Many young people were attracted by the novelty of the new religion and perhaps by curiosity about the foreign ways of the expatriates. The construction of the health centre by the Baptists also provided employment for some. Building was accompanied by evangelism and in 1968 the first group of converts was baptised. These included Jean Aba and Jacques Apala, two of the present church elders, who described the history of the Christian community to me. They told me that after the baptism a small church was built close to the market place; initially this was a simple construction

of straw mats supported on sticks to provide shade from the sun, but it was subsequently replaced by a more solid mud-walled building. This was replaced in turn in 1993 by the present building, an impressive white painted structure prominently located on a new site beside the main road and built at some expense on European lines (see Fig 4, page 62). The Bible Institute was set up in 2000. It also receives some support from the European Baptist Mission.

The great majority of the population of the village would now claim to be members of this church and almost three quarters of my interviewees said that they were Christians. The church occupies an important place in the life of the village. Attendance at services on Sundays is usually close to, or in excess of, 200 adults and young people, not including the children in the Sunday School. Christianity in its various forms is now the dominant religion in the whole Mofu-Gudur area and the wider mountain region, and Catholics, Evangelicals and Adventists, in addition to the Baptists, are active and well represented.

Although most active Christians in Mowo are members of the Baptist church, a few such as Rosaline and Haman Jean-Paul in Milambang attend services at the Catholic church not far away on the other side of the mayo in Cembey. Traditional religion is much in decline and, generally, only older people continue to make sacrifices to their ancestors. In contrast to the ease of meeting Christians in the village, it was much more difficult for me to find people who described themselves as *paiens* or traditionalists.

Although set up by expatriates, the church now has local leadership. Structurally, it is part of a *convention* of some 22 congregations in the Mokong *canton*. It belongs to a national federation, the *Union des Eglises Baptistes du Cameroun*, which is also led by Cameroonians, but with some financial support from Europe. Apart from introducing a major change in religious practices in Mowo, the church has opened the village to religious practices emanating from overseas. Ornamental ironwork on the window openings represents scenes from Biblical history, fulfilling the same decorative and didactic function as stained glass windows in churches in other countries. Some of the songs sung in worship have been introduced from western countries, and the young people in the church show a preference for western style music and musical instruments. In services, the youth choir sometimes sings accompanied by an electronic keyboard and a small drum kit made locally on a western model. The older people prefer to worship with traditional flutes, hand drums and calabash shakers.

Christianity has been a major sponsor of literacy in Mowo in the last 40 years (Brandt 1998, 2001). It relies on literacy for its internal organisation and management and the literacy practices associated with Christianity have brought literacy to the attention of large numbers of people. These will be described in more detail in Chapter 8, Section b.

Mowo is a strong centre for Christianity, since the medical centre and the Bible Institute are both Christian institutions, one meeting the physical needs of the local population, the other providing training for future church leaders. The medical centre has had the greater impact on the life of the village as, unlike the Bible Institute, it provides a service for the

local community and is the only source of western medical treatment for the village and immediate area. It offers general medical help as well as maternity and ophthalmology services. Yutta Mbiene, the administrator, and Oumarou, the chief nurse, told me that 50,000 consultations had taken place in 2006, of which 15,000 were for ophthalmology assessment and treatment.

In their view, the medical centre has made an undoubted contribution to the levels of health of the local population since its opening in 1968, both through its direct activity in treating patients and also through its educational outreach activities. There are now fewer cases of meningitis, measles and cholera, due, at least in part, to the vaccination campaigns which have been carried out. Malaria, dysentery, intestinal worms and problems associated with malnutrition continue to be at high levels but overall the health of the population has improved. Even though many women in my study told me that they had lost at least one of their children, the overall rates of infant and child mortality have fallen.

### *Arrival of Schooling*

Apart from the church and the associated medical centre and training college, the other institution which has had a major impact on the life of Mowo is the primary school (see Fig 5, page 65). It was set up in 1979, consisting of two classes held in grass shelters constructed by the parents. Interest in education was growing at that time, although in earlier years parents had been very reluctant to send their children to school, as they were apprehensive of the effect of education on them. When a school was established in Mokong some years before the one in Mowo, the *sous-préfet* had had to compel the local chiefs to set an example by sending their own children to the school. Some of the children refused to attend and ran away.

Martin (1975) holds that the reluctance of the mountain peoples to embrace education for their children was born out of their social systems. The agricultural way of life of the mountain people fitted uncomfortably with the rigid demands of school attendance, and the animistic culture of the area had traditionally been resistant to innovation. Whatever the cause, a tradition of formal education was established in the mountain area much later than in the Fulbe areas on the plains with the result that the Mofu people and others around them have since found themselves at some disadvantage in relation to other groups. Elsewhere in the north, many schools were set up soon after the Second World War, and several generations of children received education before the mountain children began to attend school. The mountain people were “comparatively backward” (Le Vine 1971) with the result that when new opportunities for employment appeared in the village, especially in the form of the medical centre which required well-educated and trained staff, Mofu people were not well positioned to take advantage of them. This disparity has persisted and it continues to be a source of considerable frustration in the area.

In Mowo, the school has always been independent of the church but some of the people whom I interviewed told me that the church had been influential in promoting its establishment and, from the beginning, the church leaders had encouraged parents to enrol their children.



The school in Mowo opened with some 200 children and 2 teachers, one of whom was Jean Claude Fandar, my interpreter. He taught for two years before taking a more remunerative employment with the company building the main road. In 1985, the school was officially recognised by the government. In the 2007-2008 school year, it had grown to 654 pupils taught in a row of six classrooms built of concrete blocks with corrugated roofs. Unlike some smaller schools in the area, children can complete their six years of primary education at this school and receive a certificate of primary education if they reach a satisfactory standard. The school is part of the national education system controlled by the Ministry of Education which is responsible for paying the salaries of those teachers who are trained. The parents pay a registration fee of 1,000 cfa for each child, plus 800 cfa towards the teachers' salaries and the other running expenses of the school (£1.06p and 85p respectively). Parents also have to pay for exercise books and pens for their children and for clothes for school, although the wearing of uniform is not strictly enforced.



**Figure 5: Mowo Primary School**

Although it is now the norm for the parents in my study to send their children to school this does not guarantee that all their children will attend. The cost of education is an issue for many parents. Magerdawa, my informant, told me that the school fees and related expenses for his three children who go to the local school costs him 11,900 cfa per year (£12.60), a significant sum for someone such as himself with little income. There continues to be a tendency for parents to prioritise education for their sons rather than their daughters if their resources are limited. In the 2007-2008 school year, only 41% of the total school roll of 654 pupils were girls, a figure corroborated by an almost identical proportion at the nearby primary school at Singomaksa on the edge of Mokong (Hollingsworth, personal communication 15th March 2008). Parents such as Rosaline may be committed to their daughters having at least some education but they continue to

judge that girls have fewer prospects than boys do, as they are not likely to obtain employment. The future for most girls means life as a wife, mother and farmer, all of which are most likely to be within Mowo or the Mofu-Gudur area and do not require formal education. Except within groups which are reserved for women, there are few opportunities for women to exercise leadership in the community.

Secondary education was not available in the Mofu area until recently. The secondary schools nearest to Mowo were located in Gazawa, about six miles away towards Maroua, or in Mokolo. However, the majority of children do not progress beyond primary school as the cost of sitting the entrance examination which amounts to 5,000 cfa (£5.30), the higher annual fees at the secondary schools and the expense of living away from home have prevented many parents from sending their children. Of the 110 pupils in the final year at the primary school in Mowo in the 2006-2007 school year, only 32 boys and 4 girls took the secondary school entrance examination; of these, 27 of the boys and 2 of the girls passed.

### ***Cotton Industry***

The cotton industry offers another example of a major institution in the village which is central to the village economy and at the same time has played a part in promoting the use of literacy. The local growers are organised into a GIC (*groupe d'intérêt commun*), an association which serves as the mediator between individual growers and Sodecoton. The GIC has an Executive Committee headed by Galla Goloved, the *délégué*. Once a year, there is a general meeting of all members, and elections take place every three years. The GIC has been run successfully since it was created out of a previous less structured organisation in 1994, to the extent that it is regarded as an independent GIC by Sodecoton which supervises it less closely than other GICs and allows it to manage its own store of the necessary inputs of seeds, fertiliser, herbicide and pesticide. This may be in no small measure due to the efficiency and commitment of Galla who has been the *délégué* since the GIC began.

Within the GIC, each grower is a member of a *groupe de caution solidaire*, a group typically of ten to twenty growers, each with a leader who is responsible for ensuring that the growers in his group are looking after their cotton fields as they should, keeping track of the various inputs which each grower receives and distributing the final payments at the end of each annual cycle. Although farming their separate fields, the members of the group commit to support one another such that if, at the end of the growing season, the value of the cotton grown by any member of the group is less than the cost of the inputs which he has received on credit, then the other members of the group agree to cover his deficit out of their profits. As Galla and Yougouda, the *agent de suivi* or technical supervisor, told me, the GIC in Mowo, which in 2006 comprised a total of 234 people from Mowo and the two neighbouring villages of Cembey and Singomabara, was made up of 16 *groupes de caution*.

Just as the separate groups cover any deficits of their individual members, so the GIC as a whole covers any deficits incurred by any individual *groupe de caution*. As Galla told me, there is an increasing necessity for the cotton to be grown efficiently and a decreasing

willingness to tolerate unsatisfactory practices. It was therefore agreed at the last general meeting that those who had failed to cover the cost of what they had received on credit in the last growing season would be refused credit in the next season and would have to pay in cash for the inputs they took. Some 40 people were affected by this decision.

In a complex organisation such as the cotton industry, involving large numbers of people and the management of resources and money, written records are essential if the operation is to run efficiently. Although only the minority of growers are able to read and write, literacy is still central to the industry as a whole. For this reason, Sodecoton is keen to provide training for literacy teachers when requested by local GICs.

### ***Overseas Aid***

Mowo could not have developed as it has without substantial amounts of financial assistance and expertise from further afield. I have already referred to the support of the government for the school, and of the European Baptist Mission for the church, medical centre and Bible Institute. In addition, the European Union has recently made a significant impact on the whole area through a wide-ranging project from 1996 to 2004. Wells were dug, roads repaired or created, concrete causeways built across mayos and community centres constructed. This was in addition to a large amount being spent on adult literacy classes. In Mowo, the project paid for two new classrooms at the school (European Commission 2002). Substantial assistance has also come to the village from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) for the construction of the grain store in Mowo II. It was stocked with grain which was provided in part by CIDA and the World Food Programme. Further food aid came in 2006 when 60 sacks of yellow millet were provided by RELUFA (*Réseau de Lutte contre la Faim*) a network of Cameroonian churches and NGOs supported by Presbyterian churches in the USA, and in 2007 I was instrumental in facilitating the provision by a church in the UK of about 40 sacks of millet for another grain store in the village. Heifer International, a US based NGO, is about to start a project to provide poorer people with young chicken, pigs and cattle. They will keep some of the offspring of these animals and some will be given to other poor people. Another NGO is currently planning to build a watering point near the mountain for the benefit of cattle which are driven through the village.

All these projects have reinforced the awareness of the people of Mowo that they are part of a much wider world, one in which literacy is regarded as a normal aspect of social functioning.

Looking back over the last fifty years, it is evident that the village has changed in significant ways and that the life of the community has become increasingly organised around certain important institutions. These include the church, the school and the cotton industry which all make use of literacy and promote its use directly or indirectly with the result that literacy has become established as a feature of local life. I will discuss their influence on understandings of literacy in Chapter 8.

### **Change Today**

Even at the present time, new opportunities and challenges continue to present themselves to the people of Mowo. The process of development continues, although it remains un-

clear whether this will benefit the whole village. New circumstances can be positive for those who can take advantage of them, but may be less so for those who are unable to engage with them for whatever reason. The changes taking place currently relate to income, financial management, communication, education and health. I will discuss these in turn.

### ***Fairtrade Scheme***

The prospect of increasing personal income has become possible with the Fairtrade scheme which Galla Goloved, the *délegué*, told me was introduced in the cotton GIC in 2006. This scheme has resulted in the cotton growers receiving a premium of 45 cfa per kilogram of raw cotton on top of the basic price of 190cfa (48p and £2.01, respectively), an increase of 23%. As elsewhere in the world where this scheme operates, this premium is conditional upon the growers not only producing first grade quality cotton but also committing themselves to a range of standards relating to environmentally sustainable agricultural methods as well as to the internal management and governance of their GIC. Internal democracy and transparency of processes are now as important as good cotton production (Fairtrade Labelling Organizations International 2007a, 2007b). Nathan Bello, the Sodecoton official responsible for the implementation of the scheme, explained to me that the cotton company itself has also had to change its practices by ensuring that the cotton grown by GICs involved in the scheme is kept separate from other cotton and that detailed records are maintained of its origin and its passage from the growers to the intermediaries and exporters. In return, Sodecoton itself also receives a premium. The whole scheme is monitored closely by the Fairtrade Labelling Organisation in Germany which sends inspectors on a regular basis to ensure compliance. Once bought and used in the manufacture of clothing and other goods, Fairtrade cotton is marketed as being grown in Cameroon and sold to consumers who pay a higher price for goods produced with this type of cotton because of their interest in contributing towards increasing the income of local farmers.

It remains to be seen how great the impact will be on individual farmers. Cotton growing is becoming more demanding and the costs involved are rising. Although the extra premium paid to the growers would appear to offer a considerable benefit, this has to be set against the increasing cost of the inputs required. Both fertiliser and insecticide have gone up in price, with the result that the net benefit to growers, even those who grow under the Fairtrade scheme, is not necessarily greater than before.

The benefits from the Fairtrade scheme may be more apparent in the village as a whole rather than in the lives of individual farmers as GICs which participate in the scheme receive an annual bonus to be used for a community development project. In the case of Mowo, the GIC received more than 2,000,000 cfa (£2,120) in 2006 which the General Assembly decided would be used to install an electricity supply to the village. The work was carried out in the middle of 2007. Previously, only the medical centre and the Bible Institute, together with a few associated houses, had benefited from the main electricity line through the village. The new supply will be enough to provide lighting to a number of houses in Mowo II. This is a small but very significant improvement to the living conditions of some people in the middle of the village who are likely to find that life outside of the hours of daylight is considerably easier than before. It may also bring noticeable

differences to the economic life of the village and, for instance, make it possible for people to start small businesses, as those who run grinding mills near the health centre have already done. Only time will tell if televisions become more common in the village. At present, only a few people living near the medical centre have sets.



**Figure 6: Mowo Cotton Market**

### ***Local Banking and Health Insurance***

New opportunities have also become available to enable people to manage their personal finances more easily and to start small business enterprises. In 2002, a credit union, the *Caisse Mutuelle d'Épargne et de Crédit*, was established in the village with the help of SAILD, a Cameroonian NGO which specialises in capacity-building. Formed out of a previously existing village savings society, the *Caisse* uses the money which members deposit to make loans to other members who are in need of finance. It is run by a local committee with ongoing technical support from the SAILD office in Maroua. The President, Mayadiga Mbima Pierre, told me when I interviewed him that the *Caisse* has 308 members from Mowo and the surrounding area. Members can leave their money for safe-keeping with the *Caisse* and withdraw it at any time, minus an administration charge of 100 cfa for each 5,000 cfa they withdraw. Alternatively, they have two options for earning interest on their money. An “easy access” account, which requires regular saving but allows savers immediate access to their money, pays interest of 3.5%, and a fixed term account pays interest of 7%.

Mayadiga explained to me that members of the *Caisse* have the right to borrow money and that loans of 100,000 cfa to 300,000 cfa are common. People often use these for buying millet when it is cheap in order to resell later at a higher price or for buying young

sheep and goats for fattening. Although the system works well in principle and the facility to borrow money has been helpful to many people, the Executive Committee of the *Caisse* admit that they are facing a crisis in that they are finding it difficult to ensure that those who borrow money repay it. Some 1,500,000 cfa (£1,590) is currently outstanding in overdue loans, a relatively large amount of money which is denying finance to people who are in need of it.

Two years after the creation of the *Caisse*, the *Mutuelle de Santé* was formed which, like the *Caisse*, is a local organisation run by people from Mowo with the help of SAILD. Galla Goloved is one of the Executive Committee and together with Hamidou Antoine, the treasurer, he explained to me a little about the organisation. It exists as a health insurance society which provides contributors with help towards the cost of their medical treatment, covering 75% of the cost of treatment in return for a premium of 225 cfa per month. In May 2007, 270 people from Mowo and the wider area were members of the *Mutuelle* which provided cover for them and their families, a total of 1,562 people. Like the *Caisse*, it is facing management difficulties as the irregular availability of cash in the village prevents members from making their contributions each month. Although the *Mutuelle* accepts irregular payments, this creates difficulties with establishing the entitlement of members to treatment if their contributions are not up to date. The amount which has to be paid to the *Centre de Santé* in Mowo and to other medical centres also varies from month to month, and the Executive Committee is concerned that incoming contributions may soon be insufficient to cover projected payments.

### ***Mobile Phones***

New opportunities in the area of communication have become available in the last four or five years. According to Cathala *et al* (2003), mobile phone technology was introduced in the north of Cameroon in 2001. A few people in Mowo who are employed and have the financial resources to afford them now possess their own mobile phones. Among the many people with whom I interacted during my stay in the village, I was aware that mobile phones were owned by the members of the CALMO translation team, Yaya André, the Hollingsworths' cook, Galla the *délégué* of the cotton GIC, and Gladama the church evangelist. Jean Claude, my interpreter, also owned a mobile but for him and others the difficulty of recharging the battery and the irregularity of the phone signal meant that his mobile was often not in use. In February 2006, when a meeting was called to elect a new committee for the cotton GIC, I noticed that some young men on the fringe of the gathering were playing with their mobile phones and one of them appeared to be taking pictures with his. Mobile phones are becoming more common, even if the reception of the network signal in the village is sporadic. There is now a notice in a prominent place inside the church asking the congregation to turn off their mobiles.

### ***New Secondary School***

A particularly important change which is likely to have far-reaching consequences is the opening of the new secondary school between Mowo and Mokong which will serve these two villages and the surrounding area. This school has been the desire of the community for many years. Without the possibility of financial help from the Cameroon government, the costs of the building have had to be met out of contributions from individuals and in-

stitutions such as the local churches, especially the Catholic church in Mokong. Much of the structure, consisting of two classrooms, was completed in 2007 and there was considerable celebration when the government announced officially that it would recognise the school.

The opening of the school should create new educational opportunities for local children, as it will make secondary education much more accessible. It is likely that more young people will receive secondary education and that more will stay in the village, rather than being sent by their parents to stay with relatives and attend school in other parts of the country.

Lastly, new health opportunities may shortly become available after the opening of the enlarged ophthalmology department at the medical centre. The construction of the building which consists of at least ten separate rooms began in 2007. Whether people living nearby in Mowo will be able to take advantage of the new department will depend, in this as in other areas of life, on financial issues. Not everyone is equally well placed to be able to benefit from this improved service.

#### ***4.c Individual Responses to Change***

This description of the changes which have touched the lives of the people of Mowo in the recent past and which continue to do so at the present time reveals a picture of ongoing evolution and development. Although some of these changes, such as the establishment of the medical centre and the school in the 1960s and 70s, may have brought obvious benefits, change is not always for the good. The increase in the population, in particular, is placing an overwhelming pressure on the ability of the village to provide for its own food needs. Growing adequate food and obtaining the money which is necessary for ordinary life continue to be a major preoccupation for most people, and it seems to me that it is becoming increasingly difficult for people to meet their needs. In this section, I will record some of the comments which people made to me on this subject.

If change is evident to observers from outside the village, it is all the more obvious to the residents of the village. Life is not standing still in Mowo, any more than it is in other parts of the country, or in the rest of the world. As Rosaline commented, "Every day, there's something new!" (PD 150: 14).

Her view was supported by Abdou Madsal, who was particularly well placed to comment on the changes in life in the village as, when I met him, he had just returned to Mowo after living in Yaoundé for ten years. For him, there is no comparison between life today and life in the past. As he said, "Looking at the life of our grandparents, and then at life today, it's like two different worlds" (PD 48: 622). He has noticed how more children are now going to school and how the rising levels of education have resulted in people becoming more open to new ideas and to new ways. He commented that material standards have risen as people have built larger houses or bought motorcycles for themselves, and he is aware of a new attitude between people. In the past, he said, considerable cultural pressure prevented people from getting ahead and aggrieved individuals would practice sorcery to bring misfortune on those whose success they resented. In his view, this practice has declined considerably now that education has opened new opportunities for people in the village. His brother, Jean Paul, agreed with him, saying that people get on

with one another much better than previously: “Nowadays, things have changed - it used to be war all the time!” (PD 48: 706).

In spite of these apparent benefits, people generally feel less than positive about the changes which are taking place. For many, the cost of living is a major concern. As the economy has changed from being based on mutual exchange to being dependent on cash, it has become more necessary than ever before to have money. At the same time, it is necessary to have more of it than before as prices continue to rise. Those who have least money are least able to manage and they do not feel much hope for the future, especially given that their standard of living depends largely on the productivity of their land. Magerdawa remarked, “The land is poor, so how can our children go to school?” (PD 149: 21). He added that even if modern health care is now available at the medical centre, you have to have money to be able to benefit from it. Likewise, Rosaline commented that the need for money is such that people sell their millet immediately after the harvest because they need cash, but then they do not have enough stocks to last the year, so they have to buy millet later on when the price is much higher. This is a cycle of poverty, which only serves to exacerbate the problem (PD 150: 32). It is hard to avoid doing this when selling millet is the most readily available means of obtaining immediate cash. Although it would be unwise to over-generalise, since the individual circumstances of people and their personal resources of energy, health and determination are not all the same, it appears that those at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder see little reason for hope for the future. Their first priority and major focus in life is to meet their immediate needs of food and shelter. Most of the people of Mowo are in this category. Their primary and constant concern is to manage their lives as well as they can and, in short, to survive. Their views of literacy have to be set in this context.

#### **4.d Conclusion**

This chapter has presented a picture of the village of Mowo and of the major features of the life of the people who live there. It has shown how the circumstances of their lives are in a continuous state of change, offering them new opportunities but also presenting new challenges. Their means of supporting themselves have changed with an increasing dependence on agriculture, although this has been accompanied by increasing difficulties in providing adequately for themselves from the land available to them. Local facilities and services have improved, whether in the form of the road which makes travel easier, the medical centre which offers an invaluable resource to those who are ill, or the primary school which most of the children of the village now attend.

Alongside these changes within the village, there have been wider changes affecting the relationship between the village and its surrounding area, and even much further afield. Within the last century, the village has been integrated into a wider political entity, firstly through French colonial control, and then through the establishment of the independent country of Cameroon. Mowo is now the lowest layer of an administrative hierarchy which stretches through Mokolo, the principal town of the *département*, to Maroua, the provincial capital, and ultimately to Yaoundé, the capital of Cameroon, some 500 miles away. Many decisions which impinge on the residents of the village are made at these varying distances from the community.



The links between Mowo and the wider world do not stop at this point. As the example of the international cycle race has shown, the “outside world” has come into the village. At a more fundamental level, Christianity, arriving through missionaries from Europe, has brought a radical difference to the religious practices of the village. Educational practices have undergone a major change and have become formalised through the primary school, established as the local expression of a national system of education modelled on schooling in France. Agricultural practices have also changed as cotton has developed into the major local cash crop, and recently the Fairtrade scheme, administered in Germany, has made new demands of the growers, affecting their approach to cultivation.

The people of the village are thoroughly conscious of these changes since they affect them in a direct manner. These changes make up the framework within which they have to make the daily decisions necessary to maintain their lives and well-being.

Literacy occupies a prominent place among these recent changes in the life of the village. It has arrived integrated in many of the practices from outside which have become established in the village, such as those found in the school, the church and in the local administration. Among all these changes, it is pertinent to examine how literacy in particular has affected the lives of the residents of Mowo and how they view literacy at the present time. This is the topic of the next chapter.

## 5. Language and Literacy in Use

Having described in the previous chapter the village of Mowo and the salient features of life for the people who live there, I will now turn to a discussion of how literacy is used in various ways in the village.

The first part of this chapter will be devoted to clarifying the role of language. This is the linguistic dimension of the local context which I began to discuss in the previous chapter but its significance and its relationship with literacy practices demand that it have separate attention here. In Mowo, the use of language orally and in writing is characterised by multiplicity. This is apparent in the variety of languages which are in use in the area, as well as in the range of functions which these languages serve. Since literacy is always in a particular language, multilingual settings require discussions of literacy to specify the language of the literacies under consideration.

For purposes of clarity, I will first outline the languages which are in use in the village and describe how their use is distributed among the older and younger people and between men and women. Without exception, all the interviewees in this study stated that they spoke at least one language in addition to their own. This is not to imply that they were equally proficient in the languages which they spoke but it was evident to me that they were familiar with the existence of a range of languages around them and that they are able to make use of them to varying degrees.

I will then explain how the languages are used in oral communication and consider the attitudes of the local people towards the main languages available to them. In the final part of this chapter, I will discuss how these languages are used in their written form, showing how literacy is distributed across the community while being centred on particular locations or “loci of literacy”, as I will describe them.

### 5.a *Language Use*

Three languages are in common use in Mowo. These are Mofu-Gudur, Fulfulde and French. They are not encountered in equal measure nor are they used interchangeably for each has its own domain of use.

#### **Mofu-Gudur**

Mofu-Gudur (Mofu for short) is the indigenous language of the village and of the immediate area. It is spoken by some 70,000 people (Gordon 2005, Hollingsworth, personal communication 2006), almost all of whom live in a clearly defined and linguistically homogeneous geographical area, extending some 20 miles from north to south and 12 miles from east to west (see Map 2, page 185). The language is only spoken outside of this area by Mofu people who have moved to live in other parts of the country. Linguistically, it is classified as a Chadic language in the same family as several other neighbouring languages located in the Mandara mountains and on the plain around Maroua. The mutual intelligibility rate between Mofu-Gudur and the immediately neighbouring languages is in

the range of 70-90% (Barreteau and Dieu 2000). The language is one of sixty languages spoken in the Far North Province of Cameroon, each in its own clearly defined area.

Mofu is the everyday language of everyone in the area who is Mofu-Gudur by birth. It is spoken at home within the family and wherever Mofu-Gudur people are conversing informally. It is the normal language of worship in the Catholic churches, although not in the Protestant churches. It has developed over many centuries but it acquired a written form only in the last 30 years through the applied linguistic research of expatriate specialists (Barreteau 1988, Hollingsworth 1986, 1991, Pohlig and Levinsohn 1994). The language is written in Roman script in line with the established policy for the writing of the indigenous languages of Cameroon (Tadadjeu and Sadembouo 1979). The Mofu writing system is based on the principle of each phoneme being represented consistently by the same letter or combination of letters, which makes the accurate writing of the language relatively straightforward for native speakers who have received some training.

Only since the development of the written form of Mofu has it been possible for literature to be published in the language. This has been done largely at the initiative of Ken Hollingsworth and the local language committee, the *Comité d'Alphabétisation en Langue Mofu-Gudur* (CALMO). The corpus of literature published over the last 25 years consists of some 44 titles, including a series of primers serving as textbooks for the Mofu literacy classes, and a range of other booklets. Some of these are on health matters such as malaria and child care, others have cultural content including folk stories and advice on appropriate behaviour. Almost half of the booklets have a religious theme, and 17 are extracts from the Bible translated into Mofu. Not all the published titles are currently in print. The literature in Mofu has been substantially increased by the publication of the complete New Testament in early 2008. This is the first book in Mofu to be published in hard back and it is likely to be extremely popular. Some 5,000 copies were sold within the first few weeks after its publication.

Mofu is not used in any newspapers or other regularly published media, but it features on the local radio station in Maroua in one or two half-hour programmes each week. These provide a digest of national and international news, together with local announcements. They are broadcast in the early hours of the morning and, as ownership of radios is not widespread in the Mofu area, the audience for these programmes is limited.

### **Fulfulde**

The second most commonly used language in the village is Fulfulde, the regional language used widely in the north of Cameroon. It is the native language of the Fulbe people, the dominant language group in the area, and it has a strong cultural association with Islam since almost all Fulbe people are adherents of this religion. It has spread widely in the region with those individuals and ethnic groups who have adopted Islam tending to use Fulfulde in preference to their own languages. It can be written in Roman script or in Arabic script by those who are familiar with this form of writing.

Fulfulde is the *lingua franca* of the Protestant churches in the area which use it for worship and Bible study. The Bible in Fulfulde was published in 1983 (Gordon 2005). As a

regional language, it serves a valuable purpose in the national cotton company which prints many of its internal documents and forms bilingually in Fulfulde and French and conducts much of its business in Fulfulde. The company publishes *Kubaruuji*, a newspaper in Fulfulde for cotton growers, four times a year. Fulfulde is also heard in many programmes on the local radio station.

Fulfulde is spoken frequently in Mowo. It is not only well established in the church and the cotton industry but also among the Muslim community who have traditionally used this language in preference to Mofu. This may be for religious as much as social reasons as Galla Goloved told me that in the past Muslims were told that speaking any local language was a sin against Allah. This attitude may have moderated since that time but I noticed when interviewing Asta Bouba, a Muslim woman, that she conversed in Fulfulde with Jean Claude, my interpreter. The same occurred when I interviewed the village chief, Abdoulaye Wandala.

### **French**

French is the third most commonly used language in Mowo. It is one of the two official languages of Cameroon, the other being English. As an official language, French is used in government, the administration and in the judicial system, at least at the level of the *département* and above. Government officials as well as police officers and gendarmes use this language, especially if they have been transferred to the north of the country from the south and are not fluent in Fulfulde.

French is also the language of education and it is particularly prominent in the life of Mowo in this context, seeing that the children of the village are taught predominantly in French at the primary school. Although the school in Mowo is one of the few in the area where Mofu is used to teach children to read and write in the first two years of schooling, French becomes the medium of education in all subjects after that point. However, French is not widely used outside of the school setting and children receive little reinforcement for the language outside of the classroom, so many complete their education with a grasp of the language which is considerably less than fluent. Only those young people who have attended secondary school, or have gone to the south of Cameroon to find work are able to speak French with greater ease.

### **Other Languages**

Apart from Mofu, Fulfulde and French, a range of other languages are occasionally spoken in the village. As the second official language, English is taught as a subject in the primary school, but it is used outside of school even less than French. Official documents such as identity cards and birth certificates, or ballot papers in national elections, are written bilingually in English and French, and occasionally English is heard being spoken by expatriates or Cameroonians who originate from the Anglophone part of the country in the south. A few Mofu people who have lived or worked in Nigeria also have some acquaintance with the language.

Other languages used to a limited extent include Arabic, the language of worship at the small mosque in the village, and Giziga, since the Baptist church has a small group of

speakers of this language who have formed a choir to sing Giziga songs. The Giziga speaking area begins less than two miles away from Mowo on the road towards Maroua. At the medical centre, people come from a wide area for treatment, so a variety of languages can be heard there.

### **Language Use by Age and Gender**

The range of languages spoken, together with the differing circumstances of the various groups of people in the village, creates a complex mosaic of language experience and practice, the only common theme being that everyone who is native to the village is fluent in Mofu-Gudur. During my field research, I observed that children and young people have a varying mastery of French which depends on how well they have learned the language at school and the extent to which they have need to make use of the language. Those who have spent time outside of their home area, particularly if this has been in the south of the country, are more proficient than those who have not. They also have a varying knowledge of Fulfulde, dependent on their interaction with Fulfulde speakers, which is most likely to occur if they are members of the Baptist church where Fulfulde is commonly used, or if they have travelled to Maroua where Fulfulde is the majority language.

For adults, there are considerable differences between men and women. In general, although this has to be expressed with considerable caution, men are more likely than women to be conversant with Fulfulde. Men tend to travel more than women and are more likely to go to Maroua, so they have more need of that language. They are also more likely to go to Mokolo where Mafa is the predominant language. Men also are more prominent than women in the local cotton industry and so have more exposure to Fulfulde in that context. If women are familiar with Fulfulde, this is most likely to be through their participation in the activities of the church.

Men are also likely to have a higher level of knowledge of French than women. Their need for French is greater the further they travel from their home area. This is not to say that they are necessarily fluent in this language. The only Mofu people in the village who are completely fluent in French are those who have received some education and who make use of French on a regular basis. Among these are men such as Galla Goloved, the leader of the cotton GIC whose duties have included attending international cotton conferences in Mali and elsewhere, Robert Gladama, the evangelist or leader of the Baptist church, and the small group of men involved in the translation and literacy work of CALMO. Women have less exposure to French as they have less need of it. They are also less likely to have received a good grounding in French at school since fewer girls than boys attend school. It is uncommon to hear a woman of the village speaking French, but it has to be recognised that this may not be a completely accurate indicator of their ability. On one occasion in 2007, a local woman named Aissatou came to the house where I was staying in order to ask me for financial help but she was unable to make me understand what she wanted until she changed from Mofu to French. It made me wonder if there were more local women who could communicate in French, at least at a basic level, if the need arose.

Both women and men are likely to have some knowledge of other local languages if they have gone to live outside the Mofu area or if, like Rosaline, they have been brought up by relatives in other areas. People who have lived on the edges of the Mofu area may have some knowledge of neighbouring languages. For this reason, some people in Mowo are conversant with Giziga. Overall, it seems that people learn those languages which are useful to them for meeting their needs in whatever circumstances they find themselves.

### **5.b Language in Oral Communication**

The multiplicity of languages in use and the range of abilities in different languages possessed by people in the community are reflected in the way that languages are used in oral communication. In conversation, code mixing is common, with people who are expressing themselves in Mofu inserting words or phrases from Fulfulde or French into their speech. This may be a simple “filler” phrase. For instance, I noticed that Gabriel, whom I interviewed on several occasions, liked to add a common expression in Fulfulde at the end of a sentence in French, such as “*Dieu a demandé vérité, ça passe bien avec Dieu, ma la*”, the two final words in Fulfulde being the equivalent of the French “*n’est-ce pas*” (PD 38: 253). Alternatively, it may be more substantial, as when Yaya André seemed to find it easier to revert from French to Mofu in order to convey his meaning. Discussing the boundaries of the village, he said, “*Par ici-là, il y a la limite avec ari ηgwa ta ηgwa ηgene,*” meaning “*On this side, there’s the boundary with the mountain you can see.*” Code mixing and code switching are common features of communication in multilingual contexts (Baynham 1993).

A similar mixing of languages occurs at community level, particularly in meetings. This is particularly evident in services at the Baptist church where language variation is a feature of every service. The dominant language of each service is generally Fulfulde which is normally used by the worship leader for leading the service, for the notices and for some of the songs and the prayers. The Bible readings are likely to be in Fulfulde, but translated in full into Mofu, and the sermon, given in Fulfulde, is likely to be followed by a summary in Mofu. Songs are sung in Mofu, Giziga or French, the last of these by the young people’s choir. The choice of languages used in any particular service is largely governed by the dictates of the need for communication with those who may be present. In one special service when many visitors came to say farewell to the pastor who was leaving, French was used at length as it was recognised that some of those present would not understand Fulfulde or Mofu. One Bible passage was read in French and then translated into Fulfulde, and the pastor made a speech in French which was also translated into Fulfulde. The notices were given in Fulfulde but translated into Mofu or French according to whether the content of the announcement was relevant to the people of the village or to the visitors.

It is clear that practical factors affect which languages are used at any particular time depending on who is present in the congregation. Inclusiveness and successful communication are the overriding concerns. The language competence of the speakers is also a factor, as the language best understood by the congregation has to be matched by the ability of the service leaders to use that language. This varies from one service to another. It is inevitable that in a gathering of 200 people or more on a Sunday no one

language will be understood well by all those present. In contrast, the weekday meetings of church members in the village *quartiers* are usually conducted in Mofu, since all those present are local people.

### **5.c     *Language Attitudes***

If the people of Mowo are familiar with the existence of three major languages in common use in local life, it is valid to enquire what value they attach to each of these languages. In short, it appears to me that they assess each language according to, firstly, its utility for meeting their immediate needs and, secondly, its potential for offering them advantages in the future.

Mofu people generally seem to take for granted that their own language is the most effective means of communication open to them. Although the use of Fulfulde is well established among men in Mowo, not all are bilingual in Fulfulde and Mofu, and, among women, there are few who are fluent in the language. In other villages which are more remote than Mowo, there may be less use of Fulfulde by both men and women. In Mowo, Fulfulde is promoted both by the church and the cotton industry, and the main road passing through the village facilitates travel to and from Fulfulde speaking areas.

Nevertheless, Mofu people recognise that their own language does not open up to them the same possibilities for communication as do Fulfulde and French. Fulfulde is necessary for people who are travelling in the north of Cameroon outside of the Mofu area. French is necessary for those who travel further afield, or who have contact with non-Fulfulde speaking professionals, such as in the hospital in Mokolo (PD 75: 512). As will be seen in the following chapter, many people in Mowo regard French as the language of advancement and better prospects. For them, it is a language of power, at least in material terms. French is certainly necessary for anyone who hopes to obtain formal employment. Even if they do not have educational qualifications which would inevitably assume a knowledge of French, employment in cities such as Yaoundé and Douala requires an oral knowledge of French. Furthermore, any employment which involves the practice of literacy whether in the home area or elsewhere will inevitably require the ability to read and write in French given that official communication is normally in this language. For this reason, parents in Mowo are keen to send their children to school and receive some introduction to the language. They know that without French their children stand virtually no chance of obtaining employment, whereas a knowledge of French makes employment theoretically possible. As both Rosaline and Magerdawa commented, even if their children are not able to obtain work, it would still be an advantage for them to be able to speak French as it will enable them to have a better understanding of what is happening around them (PD 92: 31; 152: 14). A number of young people in Mowo are eager to attend literacy classes in French not only to increase their literacy skills but also in order to learn the language.

Mofu people are conscious of living in a multilingual environment and they are aware of the relative value of the languages available to them. It is not that one language is more important than another or that one language has to rival another but each has its own

function and areas of use. In practice, they complement one another. As Jacques Apala, one of the church elders, commented,

« Normalement il faut savoir lire premièrement en sa langue si possible, puis en français. Mais il faut voir ici chez nous, nous avons commencé avec le fulfulde, pourtant le fulfulde n'est pas notre langue. Cependant en lisant dans cette langue, nous a un peu ouvert. Après nous avons appris à lire aussi en mofu qui est encore plus intéressant. Après le français qui est aussi utile. Il y a aussi l'anglais. Ces langues servent à comprendre tout ce qui se passe dans le monde. »

Usually you should know how to read first in your own language if possible, then in French. But you need to recognise that we began in Fulfulde here, even though Fulfulde isn't our language. But reading it opened us up a bit. Then we learned to read in Mofu which is more interesting. Then there's French which is useful as well. There's English too. These languages help you understand all that is going on in the world. (PD 87: 884)

Jacques clearly recognises that each language has its own use and that the more languages one can read (and by implication, speak and understand), the more advantageous it is. Each language brings benefits with the relative value of each depending on the uses to which the language is put and on its capacity for meeting the communication needs of those who want to use it. Not being able to speak French, for instance, can be a problem, as Djaouro Koutkobei commented:

« Les inconvénients sont multiples: prenons un exemple. Si tu pars à Maroua, on parle en français, tu ne comprends. Des fois en foulfouldé tu ne comprends pas. Ta radio en français donne des informations en français, tu ne comprends pas. Vous croyez que tout cela ne vous donne pas de la satisfaction? »

There are lots of problems. For example, if you go to Maroua, people speak French and you don't understand. Sometimes you don't understand the Fulfulde either. On the radio, there's information in French, and you don't understand. Do you think that you're happy with that? (PD 50: 502)

He added that people who don't speak French and Fulfulde (and also Hausa, the Nigerian language), were no better than deaf-mutes.

Against this background of the multiplicity of the various languages spoken in the village, the uses to which they are put and the opportunities which they provide, I will now turn to a discussion of the uses of literacy in the village.

### ***5.d Literacy Practices***

In the second part of this chapter, I will discuss the place of literacy in Mowo and outline some of the most important features of the literacies practised in the village. I will demonstrate that although people in general are familiar with the concept of literacy as a



means of communication, many people have only limited need for literacy and only a minority make independent use of reading or writing for meeting their personal needs.

The focus of this discussion is on the literacy practices of adults in Mofu, Fulfulde and French. Literacy in Arabic also occurs in the context of the Muslim community of the village, but their use of literacy is quite distinct from that of the rest of the population and I have not focused on it in this research.

### **History and Present Extent of Literacy**

It is hard to be sure of the time when literacy, in the sense of the use of reading and writing of text for the purpose of communication, first became known in Mowo but it is clear that it is only in the relatively recent past that it has become common. Literacy featured in the region before colonial times in the context of Islam where reading and writing in Arabic served primarily a religious purpose. The people of Mowo did not practise Islam but they would have been aware of Koranic literacies through their Fulbe neighbours to the east.

Traditionally, Mofu society did not make use of reading and writing for conveying meaning. Although the pots used within traditional religion for sacrifices to the ancestors were, and continue to be, marked with patterns of three or four small humps to indicate the gender and clan of the person to whom the pot was dedicated, I have not found evidence that graphic signs were used for communication more widely than this. Such representation of meaning does not fall within the definition of literacy which frames this research.

Non-religious literacy only appeared as a means of communication in Mowo once the colonial administration was established in the early 20th century. The local people may have been aware of these literacy practices in the short period of German control but it is more likely that their first encounter with literacy came after France asserted its authority in the 1920s. Formal education was established much more slowly in the north of Cameroon than in the south and it was only after the Second World War that schools began to be set up widely in the north of the country, often at the initiative of missionaries. Reading and writing then began to be practised to some extent by the general population, particularly children and young people (Iyébi-Mandjeck 2000, Le Vine 1964, Tchombe 2001, Tourneux and Iyébi-Mandjek 1994). In Mowo, literacy became established once the medical centre and the church were set up in the 1960s, followed in 1979 by the primary school. Nevertheless, it still remains true that the majority of adults in the village have not learned to read and write and are unable to make independent use of literacy.

As the main focus of this study is on what people think about literacy rather than on how they use literacy, no attempt was made during the field research to ascertain a precise figure for the number of literate people in the village. This would in any case have assumed an acceptance of the definition of literacy as a measurable skill which I rejected in Chapter 2 (see page 13). However, some statistics of this nature have been proposed. It has been estimated by the Cameroon Household Survey that only some 12.5% of adults in the Mandara Mountains are literate (Government of Cameroon 2002). Among Mofu adults, Hollingsworth (personal communication, 2006) considers that only about 15% are literate.

My own evidence was based on the self-description on my interviewees. Of the 24 local men and women whom I interviewed at random, 17 described themselves as illiterate on the basis that they did not know how to read and write. Furthermore, Magerdawa, one of my primary respondents, stated that in his *groupe de caution*, only one out of the 14 men was able to read and write, and this to only a limited extent (PD 101: 28). Rosaline, another primary respondent, said that she knew of only four women in her church women's group who could definitely read and write, although she added that there might be others who were literate to some degree but who did not feel confident enough to say so. There are about seventy women in the group (PD 102: 11). With this in mind, there can be no doubt that, even with the spread of literacy in the last thirty or forty years, only a minority of adults in Mowo are literate and that this inevitably limits the extent of literacy use in the village, at least by individual people without the help of others.

### **Literacy in the Community**

In order to outline the literacy practices in the village, I will approach the topic from the point of view of social organisation and community life. From this perspective, it is clear that the literacy is used unevenly across the community and that it can be found mostly in a certain number of identifiable locations where literacy is a prominent feature of the activities which take place in them. These might be termed "loci of literacy" – places where use is made of literacy and where some degree of literacy sponsorship occurs (see page 21 and Chapter 8).

There are several such loci in Mowo. The school and the church are both obvious ones. It is very likely that in the normal weekday in the village, literacy can be encountered more in the school than anywhere else in the village. On Sundays, the church is the main centre of literacy use. In view of the significance of the school and the church, and the degree of influence which they have on the views of literacy of the local people, I will discuss them separately in Chapter 8.

Other loci are the medical centre and the Bible Institute, even if the latter exists somewhat in isolation from community life and does not have an apparent effect on the literacy practices and conceptions of the wider village. Then there are the local organisations such as the credit union and the mutual health savings society, and the literacy classes held in the village.

In the medical centre, the professional staff make use of literacy and numeracy to carry out their work of treating patients, referring to medical resource books and charts, using various types of measuring equipment as they examine those who have come for treatment, and dispensing medicines. Literacy is essential to the management of the centre, as records are kept, reports are completed and letters written. The patients visiting the medical centre are aware of at least some of these literacy practices as there are signs in French or Fulfulde indicating the different departments and buildings, and they receive prescriptions written in their consultation book to take to the pharmacy where they are given a receipt for the amount they have paid for their treatment. As in the church, literacy in the medical centre is used predominantly by those who need it by virtue of their work. The

people attending the medical centre as patients have little need to read or write when they are receiving treatment.

Literacy is important within both the credit union and the mutual health society for their internal administration and management. Literacy in French dominates. Both make use of documents which are kept in duplicate, with copies being given to the members as they deposit money, take money out, or, in the case of the health society, receive a form to take to the medical centre so that the cost of their treatment is subsidised. In both cases, these documents are given to the members irrespective of whether or not they are able to read them and it is not essential for them to be able to read them.

In the adult literacy classes, the literacy practices are somewhat similar to those of the school but in a less elaborate way. The learners also have exercise books, pens and pencils, and some may have primers, while the teachers have their own resource books and pens and chalk for writing and an attendance register. Only one class which I visited made use of a poster as part of the lesson. Generally, there are no notices or posters on display, partly due perhaps to them not having their own premises, so it is less easy to create an attractive learning environment. The CROPSEC class (see page 159) takes place under a grass shelter without walls, where grass matting is supported on sticks and the adult literacy classes in the Baptist church (see page 160) are held in bare school-like rooms normally used by the Sunday School.

Some literacy is also evident in public places. Posters are often put up beside the road outside the medical centre, for instance to advertise a polio vaccination campaign, and similar ones were on display in the centre of the village on the board attached to a tree outside the compound of the chief. Near the office of the health society, several copies of the same poster were taped to the door of the millet store. These informed the members that they should make their contributions early in the year when they received the money for their cotton. Another notice which had not been taken down announced the national census in 2004 and encouraged the population to take part, assuring them that the information they provided would not be used in any way prejudicial to them.

More informally, public places also provide an opportunity for other sorts of communication. The initials of a political party could be seen painted in big white letters on rocks at the base of the mountains near the main road, and people from Mowo going towards Mokong were aware of the encouragements to the riders in the annual cycle race, painted in the same way on the rocks beside the road, accompanied by stick-like drawings of men with bikes.

Mowo, however, lacks one locus of literacy which is common in other places where literacy has a more prominent role in local life. There is no shop of any sort selling books or newspapers. If newspapers are available in the village, they generally come through individuals who go to Maroua to buy them or through the Catholic church in Mokong which operates its own internal post system for members. A few people in Mowo read *La Voix du Paysan*, a monthly newspaper of particular interest to farmers published nationally by SAILD, the NGO which supports the credit union and the mutual health society. A few

others may receive *En Avant* the monthly magazine published for church members by the Catholic diocese of Maroua-Mokong; it discusses development topics as well as spiritual and other matters. Jean Claude, my interpreter, told me that he thought that only 50 copies came to the whole parish each month so it seems improbable that many people in Mowo, where there are relatively few Catholics, have access to it. The same may be true of the *Bulletin Économique*, published each fortnight by the diocese, which announces the price of a range of commodities in local markets so that people know where best to go to buy or sell.

The literate environment of the village (see page 3) is characterised by the existence of several distinct loci where use is made of literacy. As in the medical centre and the credit union and health savings society, literacy is used by a small number of people who have high levels of literacy proficiency and who are responsible for the managing and operation of these entities. There are also numbers of other people making use of their services who are not able to read and write. As has been noted in the case of women in Mexico with little or no formal schooling (Kalman 2001, 2005), and in South Africa (Kell 2005, Malan 1996a), the people of Mowo are able to make use of the prescriptions and savings books which they receive, and to do so successfully for the purposes for which they are intended, without being able to read the words written on them. When they need to read or write a text, they are usually able to find someone to help them. Nevertheless, this did not count as literacy for many of my informants who told me that they would like to be able to make greater use of literacy without the help of others.

### **Literacy in the Home**

Another locus of literacy which does not feature strongly in Mowo is the home, although this does not mean that literacy is totally absent. I will discuss first the textual material which people possess and then, in the next section, the most common literacy practices of people in the village.

Everyone whom I interviewed in this study possessed texts of some kind, even if the quantity was limited. Most of the texts were personal documents, often of an official nature, and it was uncommon to find someone who owned reading matter such as a book. The only person in the study to own what might be considered to be a library was Gabriel, one of the three primary informants, who had about a dozen booklets and fragments of booklets in Fulfulde, mostly on religious themes.

Among the range of documents which people showed me, I noticed that many men had identity cards. These are required by law but, in practice, only those who expect to travel obtain them. Checks on travellers by gendarmes are common, so it is essential to be able to prove your identity at the risk of being arrested. Although the fee for an identity card is only 1,000 cfa (£1.06), the actual cost is higher as it involves having a photograph taken and also going to the appropriate office in Mokolo, with all the attendant costs of the journey. This discourages people from obtaining a card unless they really need it.

In the same way, Cameroonian citizens are required to have birth certificates but few people actually obtain them. Birth certificates may be necessary for enrolling one's children in school but this is overlooked in practice. Instead, the declaration received from the

maternity unit of the medical centre is regarded as sufficient. Mofu culture places little importance on knowing the exact age of individuals and birthdays are not celebrated. If people need a birth certificate, they can apply for one at any time. They may then take the opportunity to estimate their age to their own advantage, as Jean Claude did as a teenager when he reduced his age by two years so that he would not be too old to gain admission to secondary school in Mokolo (PD 60: 58). The dates of birth written on these certificates are often inaccurate.

Marriage certificates are even more uncommon, not least because marriage is not usually formalised with official ceremonies but by simple arrangement between the families concerned in which the bridegroom pays a dowry for his wife to her parents. Only one person in the study had a marriage certificate. This was Rosaline who had gone through a ceremony of marriage with her husband so that she could be baptised at the Catholic church which she attends (see Fig 8, page 94). No one showed me a death certificate.

Whether or not people possess official certificates, they invariably have a mixture of other papers or documents which serve an official purpose. Commonly they have a *carnet de consultation* (consultation booklet) which they use when going to the medical centre for treatment. This may be one officially printed by the medical centre or an exercise book cut in two across the middle to serve the same purpose. Many people have a voting card to show that they are registered as electors. People who grow cotton almost always have the latest purchase note which they were given when they sold their cotton. Some people also have tax receipts showing that they have paid the local tax of 2,000 cfa (£2.12) for the year. These documents are often kept in wallets or are wrapped together in plastic or cloth for protection. There are particular challenges involved in taking care of any textual matter in Mowo. People told me that they had lost their documents when their houses had collapsed, or that their papers had been damaged by rain leaking into their homes or by termites eating them.

Apart from personal documents, a small number of people showed me booklets of various kinds, usually with soft covers and with the pages stapled together at the spine. These were commonly Fulfulde or Mofu literacy primers kept by some people from classes they had attended in the past, or Bible extracts in Mofu produced by CALMO.

Very few people had books. Books are relatively expensive and not available locally and they are of little use to people who are unable to read them. If people possess any book, it is most likely to be a Bible in Fulfulde. The people in the village who are most likely to have books in their homes are Christians. Occasionally people have school textbooks in French, which their children may be using or they may have used in the past. One man showed me his French dictionary.

### **Uses of Literacy**

The amount of written material in local homes is only an approximate indicator of the degree to which people engage with literacy in their lives. Even those who possess texts do not necessarily read them, and texts such as identity cards and birth certificates are not in any case intended to be read for the information which they contain but rather to be

used as required to access an entitlement or to provide proof of status. People can identify the documents, and they understand the purpose of them and what to do with them, even if they cannot read the words printed on them. Of greater significance in the present study are questions concerning how people make use of reading and writing. In Mowo, two specific literacy practices are salient. These are Bible reading and letter writing.

Apart from being read in public in the church on Sundays, the Bible is also read in the weekly *quartier* groups where Christians in each part of the village come together in individual people's compounds for mutual support. Rosaline told me that in her group the Bible is typically read and there is a time of prayer as well as discussion of matters of concern. On these occasions, most people participate in the Bible reading by listening. Not many people read the Bible for themselves. However, several literate people referred to this as one of the particular literacy practices in which they engage. Salatou Obadiah, for instance, who is a literacy teacher and leader of the church youth group in the village of Zidim, told me that he usually reads the Bible every day. Mitchibadou David, another church leader, is often involved in explaining its content to the church members, so he reads the Bible for this purpose.

Another important function of literacy is the writing of letters for personal correspondence. It was not possible to ascertain how often people send or receive letters but it was evident that the frequency varied a great deal from person to person. On the one hand, Rosaline told me that she had not received a letter since she had been married. On the other hand, men such as Djaouro Koutkobei Ridjo who is a *quartier* chief commonly receive written communications, perhaps as often as once a day or more. During my interview with him, a message was brought to him from the lamido in Mokong, and the same occurred when I interviewed Abdoulaye Wandala, the chief of the village. Other people in a similar position of responsibility would be Gladama, the church evangelist, and Galla, the leader of the cotton GIC. For most people in Mowo who do not have particular responsibilities, it seems that sending or receiving a letter is an occasional or rare event.

Nevertheless, personal correspondence is a well-established use of literacy in the community. In the absence of a local postal service, a letter is normally sent by hand and, when the sender is unable to deliver it personally, it is delivered by an intermediary on his behalf, perhaps passing from one person to another until it reaches its destination. Letter writing serves a wide range of purposes. Often people want to communicate with their relatives living at a distance in other parts of the country. Typically, the purpose is to ask after the health of the family member and to request that they send financial help. Younger men also write letters to their sweethearts to express their affection for them. When someone who is not literate wants to send a letter, they ask for help from a literate friend or member of their family.

Letters are composed to ask for help of some kind from people outside the family. In this case, the letter may be accompanied by a request in person or it may serve in the place of a personal visit. Gabriel told me that some people feel that presenting a request in writing is preferable to doing this in person in that it avoids the risk feeling shame if the person

approached refuses their request. Such letters are usually written in Fulfulde or French depending on the language competence of the person sending the letter and the person receiving it. Letter writing in Mofu for this or other purposes does not appear to be well established.

Nevertheless, such is the value of communicating by letter that many more people engage in letter writing than are able to write letters for themselves. People feel a strong desire to send messages to others, and when it is impossible to speak to the person concerned directly, or when they choose not to do so, sending a letter is the most readily available alternative. People who want to send a letter when they are not able to write the letter for themselves find someone who is able to read and write and who is willing to write the letter for them. This may be a neighbour or friend, or their own child provided that they have been to school for long enough to be proficient in writing. Likewise, when a non-literate person receives a letter, they are obliged to find someone to read the letter to them. Issues of trust and confidentiality assume considerable importance when requesting help from another person in view of the financial nature of much correspondence. For this reason, people who are not literate prefer to ask members of their own family to read and write letters for them, as this reduces the risk of their personal business being spread too far abroad, as Wadi Mbedetemy pointed out to me (PD 73: 760).

### **How Necessary is Independence in Literacy?**

Despite the existence of certain clearly identifiable loci of literacy, and despite the literacy practices which are valued to a greater or lesser extent by the population, it nevertheless remains true that literacy is not used widely by the general population of the village, particularly in the sense of individuals making use of literacy independently of others. Being able to read and write for oneself is not fundamental to village life, and living in Mowo is not particularly difficult for those who are unable to read and write. As Malan and Kell noted in South Africa (Kell 2005, Malan 1996a), and Betts (2003) in El Salvador, survival in no way depends on possessing literacy skills, and indeed those who have to rely on others for help with their literacy related tasks may be able to access resources as easily as those who are literate. If this is true in South Africa and El Salvador, it is also likely to be true in Cameroon. In Mowo, the norm is illiteracy, rather than literacy, and local life is conducted in recognition of this, with many people carrying out literacy tasks with the help of others, a practice which has been described as “secondary literacy” (Papen 2007, Rogers 2003b).

The practice of asking for the help of others extends beyond the realm of personal correspondence. Anyone who is not literate may ask for help at any time depending on their needs or desires. The leaders of the *groupes de caution* in the cotton GIC are often non-literate and commonly obtain help with keeping records of the activities of their group and with reading the messages sent to them. The role of *secrétaire* is well recognised in the village and such literate people are used on a regular basis by the *quartier* chiefs and the village chief, all of whom are unable to read and write. The lamido of Mokong is similarly dependent on a *secrétaire* for communication with the civil administration in Mokolo.

Non-literate people are not singled out by their inability to sign their names. The normal style of signature in Mowo and elsewhere in the region consists of what appears to be a scribble bearing little resemblance to the letters of the name of the person signing. Most people who are not literate are able to hold a pen and sign in this way such that their signature appears very little different from those who are literate. People do not substitute their signature with a cross, nor are non-literate people expected to use a thumbprint.

Nor is the inability to read or write a disadvantage when elections take place. Although many people are unable to read the names of the candidates or the political parties, each party has its own symbol and colour, and they make sure when they are campaigning for support that the electorate is aware of these. Voting does not necessarily require the voters to have any knowledge of writing or to be able to make a mark on a ballot paper. In the case of the elections for the committee of the cotton GIC in 2006, the election for each officer took place in turn; those in favour of a candidate placed a coloured piece of paper in an envelope which they dropped into the ballot box, while those who were not in favour placed an empty envelope into the box.

Illiteracy is not a barrier to long distance communication. Instead of writing a letter with the help of a literacy mediator, an alternative for some people is to make use of a mobile phone to call the person whom they wish to contact. Mobile phones are not yet widely used in Mowo, but a few people possess them and they are sometimes willing for others to use them to make or receive calls if they are willing to pay the cost.

This however is not to say that life proceeds without any difficulties for people who are unable to read and write, and, as I will show in Chapters 6 and 7, some of my interviewees were convinced of the advantages of being independent as literacy users.

### ***5.e Conclusion***

This chapter has demonstrated the multilingual nature of life in Mowo. It has shown that people in the village are familiar with the use of several different languages around them and that they recognise the usefulness of each of these languages for particular functions and in particular contexts. These languages are used to varying degrees orally and in writing.

Within the lifetime of many of the people of the village, literacy and literacy practices have become well established, particularly through certain loci of literacy, but many people find little need for literacy and only a minority of people possess the skills necessary to read and write independently. Such literacy skills are distributed unevenly by age and gender, with younger men being most likely to possess some degree of literacy ability. It is a normal for people who are not able to read and write without help to engage with literacy through a literacy mediator.

In the next chapter, I will turn to the issue of what the people of Mowo think about literacy before discussing the implications of this for the literacy teaching programmes of the area.



## 6. Three Mofu People

Having described how language and literacy are used in practice in Mowo, it is now time to introduce in more detail the people who opened their lives and shared their views of literacy with me. This study would not have taken its present shape without their involvement.

As I explained in Chapter 3, after I had interviewed 24 residents of the village in 2006, I selected three of them to interview in more detail, visiting them each several times over a period of six months in 2007. I selected them on the basis of their willingness to be interviewed in the first phase of the study and also to ensure that my research covered both men and women, and people who regarded themselves as literate as well as those who described themselves as non-literate. I had originally intended to select two men and two women, of whom one of each would be literate and the other non-literate but the absence of literate women in my earlier interviews resulted in a final group of three rather than four people.

I will present them in turn, including something of their lives as they described them to me and as I observed them, with a particular focus on their engagement with, and views of, literacy.

### 6.a *Amcey-Palah Rosaline*

Rosaline was one of my closest neighbours when I lived in Mowo. Her home, only about 100 yards away on the other side of a millet field from where I stayed, was a typical Mofu compound of four grass-roofed huts made of mud, like the wall which joins them to one another and forms an enclosure for the compound. Two of the huts serve as bedrooms and one as a kitchen. The fourth hut is a general-purpose storeroom.

Rosaline sleeps in one of the huts with her five children, three girls and two boys. She told me that Anne, her eldest was 10, and Sylvie was 6, but she was not sure of the age of Sabie her second child. Her two youngest children, Boniface and Viata, are boys. Boniface was 4 and Viata a baby, having been born in December 2006.

Her husband, Jean Paul, sleeps in another hut. Like most people in the village, he is a farmer, growing millet, peanuts and cotton, but he also earns money as a tailor. Sometimes when I visited, he was sitting under the grass shelter outside his hut, working at a Singer sewing machine which he rents and using his feet on the treadle to make the machine stop and go. Three times a week, he straps it to the back of his bicycle and goes to one of the local markets in Mokong, Cembey or Durum where he carries out tailoring for customers during the day. Because he went to school as a child, he is able to read and write. This has evidently helped him with his tailoring and has enabled him to be given some responsibility in the cotton GIC where he has the role of making sure that the growers bring their cotton at the right time to the place where it is weighed and collected together before being taken away to the cotton factory in Maroua. He can read and write in Mofu, as well as in French and Fulfulde, having been taught by Ken Hollingsworth some years ago.

Rosaline is not sure of her age but she knows that she was born in Manguilda, another small Mofu village, a few miles north of Mowo on the other side of the mayo. She is the fifth of seven children. Her Mofu name was chosen by her grandfather and can be literally translated as “die outside”, a possible allusion to the sometimes reluctant descent of Mofu people from their homes on the mountains down to the plain (see page 55).



**Figure 7: Amcey-Palah Rosaline with Viata**

She told me that when she was six years old, her parents sent her to live with her grandmother so that she could help her with her domestic and farming work. For this reason, she did not go to school, but as her grandmother lived in the area where Mofu-Durum is spoken, she is now able to speak that language. This language is closely related to Mofu-Gudur.

She spent about ten years with her grandmother before marrying Jean Paul and moving to Mowo to live with him. She was not sure how long she had been married but she thought that it was about twelve years. In view of this chronology, I assumed that she was about 28 years old.

She has not lived anywhere other than with her parents, then her grandmother, and now her husband. She has never been to Maroua or Mokolo. She said she would be interested to go there and was disappointed that she had been unable to attend a recent diocesan church event in Maroua. Travelling is out of the question as she does not have an identity card.

Since her marriage, she has been occupied providing for her husband, looking after the children and farming. She has plenty to do and she told me that at certain times of the year she is simply too busy to eat. Each morning she goes three times to the nearest water point to fetch water, carefully carrying it back in a galvanised bucket on her head. Until the water pump outside the school fell into disrepair in 2006, she was able to fetch clean

water from there but when I returned early in the following year she was going down the slope to the well 200 yards away behind the Hollingsworths' house. This, however, became unpalatable after soap had fallen in so she then had to go twice as far away to the mayo instead. Fetching water might take up to an hour in the morning. She would do the same in the evening.

Like all the women of Mowo, she cooks on an open fire and has to fetch firewood on a regular basis, finding it where she can on the mountain. There is no ready source of firewood nearby, so this task can take some hours. Normally she does this once a week on Saturdays as she is able to carry enough on her head to last the whole week, provided that it is of the type which burns slowly, but in the dry season she goes more frequently in order to build up a stock of wood for the rainy months when she is more occupied with her farm work. Apart from being time-consuming, it can also be a hazardous task and sometimes women are killed either by falling from trees they are cutting down or by being crushed by rocks dislodged on the mountain.

She earns some money by brewing *bil-bil*, the millet beer enjoyed by both men and women in the area, and selling it in the weekly market in Cembey. Her main occupation, however, is farming, either for her own family or for other people, for which she is paid in cash or kind. Even in the dry season in 2007, when other people were enjoying a time of relative relaxation, she was busy taking care of an onion field on the other side of the mayo belonging to another person. This required constant attention to remove the weeds which grew rapidly thanks to the sunshine and the water irrigating the onion plants. She also had to make sure that the enclosure made of thorn branches around the field was kept intact so that goats did not get in. Although they do not eat the onions, they trample on them as they are eating the weeds. It is harder to keep out the cattle which are driven through the village and she was upset that in May, just before they were due to be harvested, a lot of the onions had been eaten by a herd. She had not been able to establish the identity of the person responsible.

Farming is difficult and a lot of effort can result in little reward. In 2005, serious flooding destroyed the millet which she and her husband were growing in a field near the mayo so that they had to buy millet instead. Their cotton field had been inundated at the same time and they had had to sell two of their goats in order to pay for the fertiliser they had taken on credit. The farming season in 2006 had also been difficult for them. They had started to grow millet in a field which they had rented but the ownership of the field was disputed and finally taken from them by the chief without any compensation. They had ended up with only a quarter hectare which had produced only two sacks of millet, which she said was just enough for one person for a year. By February 2007, six months before the next harvest, they were already having to buy the millet they needed.

Whenever they can, Rosaline and Jean Paul also keep goats and chicken. She was pleased that a goat which I gave her produced two female kids, although unfortunately one of them died at birth. Goats can be sold for cash but they are susceptible to disease and in the absence of any locally available veterinary care, they can die suddenly, leaving their

owners with no return on their investment. She and Jean Paul once had five goats die in an epidemic.

They are in a constant battle to obtain the money they need. She commented that people have to be more self-reliant now as in her view people do not help one another as they did in the past. She felt that in times past people who were hungry could go to work in someone else's field and they would be paid with a bowl of millet, but now such arrangements are more formalised. The employer is more careful to work out in advance what he will pay for the work done and often he prefers to pay in cash. In her view, people put their own needs first nowadays. For instance, they are reluctant to take in children in their extended family who have been orphaned.

Personal relationships now take second place to the pressure of the need to get money. She remarked,

« Mais maintenant, si tu n'as rien, même la fille de ta maman, même un gars de ta maman, même ton père, lui-même qui t'as mis au monde, ne te considère pas. Ils considèrent celui qui gagne quelque chose. »

But nowadays, if you've got nothing, even if you're the daughter of your mother, or the son of your mother, even your father, the one who brought you into the world, they don't care about you. They only care about people who are getting money. (PD 150: 20 hard copy transcription)

Money is a real issue. People need money more than they used to, and if you are in need, it is harder to find someone who will lend money to you. She told me the story of a local man who had repeatedly refused to help poor people on the grounds that he did not have 5 francs to his name, only for him to be burgled and robbed of a substantial amount of money. I could not confirm the accuracy of her account but the fact that she told me this story was indicative of her attitude, both towards herself and towards other people whom she regards as being well off.

She feels that life is hard for poor people such as herself and Jean Paul.

« Toi qui est pauvre, tu penses à te débrouiller seulement pour manger dans ton ventre, tu ne penses pas à gagner plus pour être riche. »

If you're poor, all you think about is getting by and just having something in your stomach. You don't think about getting more so you can be rich. (PD 150: 22 hard copy transcription)

The pressure to obtain money is such that she believes that people have been led into breaking the law. In her view, the risk of being attacked and having your money stolen had increased. Her view was supported by my interpreter, Jean Claude who on regularly avoided a particular route through open country, as passers-by had been attacked there in recent years.

Rosaline is a committed Christian and goes regularly to the Catholic church in Cembey on Sundays. She is a member of the church women's group in her *quartier* and was a leader until 2006. This involved making sure that people were helping one another. She benefited from the care of the other members when she gave birth to Viata, as they brought firewood and water for her while she was recovering. As a mark of the importance of her faith to her, she chose to be baptised in 2004 and she showed me the card which recorded her baptism by the bishop on 11th April, followed by her first communion on the same day. With the encouragement of her priest, and as a prelude to her baptism, she and Jean Paul had been married in a civil ceremony a few weeks before. She showed me the certificate of her marriage in Mokong (see Fig 8, page 94).

She told me when I first met her that she was not able to read and write. She explained this as being due to her not having been to school, unlike one of her sisters and two of her brothers, one of whom is now a schoolteacher in Koza near the border with Nigeria. Nevertheless, I later realised that she is not completely without literacy skills. She is able to sign her name with a simple squiggle as she had done on her marriage certificate. She also told me that she could read numbers, although only write numbers up to 3. She could also tell the time on a digital or traditional clock, and could use mental arithmetic to calculate what to charge her customers in the market and what change to give them. She said that sometimes customers try to rush her in order to cheat her but she does not allow them to confuse her. When measuring out the quantity of seeds she needs when growing millet, she uses a standard traditional measure. Not knowing how to sew, unlike her husband, she said that she has no need of the literacy skills which he uses, but that she would learn them if it were necessary for her. She does not feel a great need to extend her literacy ability. She no longer receives letters. This had only happened when boys wrote to her as a teenager. She said that she can do what she needs to do with literacy, and for other tasks she can rely on her husband to help her.

In spite of having what she regards as an adequate level of literacy for her needs, she nevertheless feels a certain degree of frustration at not being able to do more. Here is an extract from my first interview with her on 15th March 2006, when Jean Claude posed a question on my behalf, asking her how she felt about being unable to read and write:

« Ça ne me plaît pas parce que les gens font et j'ai envie de faire aussi comme eux mais pas des chance. C'est mieux que tu me donnes du papier que je vois. Si je connais, je peux voir. »

I'm not happy at all, because people do it and I want to do the same as them, but there's no way. It's good if, when you give me something to read, I could read it. If I knew how to, I could read it. (PD 69: 612-616)

She went on to say that she would particularly like to read the Bible because people who can read Scripture know better what God wants them to do so that they can go to heaven. She also told me that being literate means that you can write letters without having to get someone to help you; unless you have a child who is literate, you have to find someone else and you have to give them something for doing it for you. Another advantage of lit-

eracy is that you do not have to depend on what other people tell you; you can never be sure if someone is telling you the truth but, if you can read, you have a way of checking what they have told you. Being literate also means that you can write things down when you have to do, so that you do not forget them.



**Figure 8: Rosaline's marriage certificate**

When I asked her what she would do if she were literate, she replied that she could then teach other women to read and write. She could also sew like her husband and she would know how to grow things better, although she did not specify exactly how this would help. Even if she did not use literacy to earn money, she would still know what was written in books.

Nevertheless, it was clear that Rosaline was not an example of someone who had a strong desire to become literate and who was being held back by circumstances beyond her control. She told me that she had, in fact, attended some literacy classes in French at her church in 2005 and 2006, taught by Madeleine, one of her neighbours. This, however, only became apparent on my last visit to her. Until that time, I had accepted what she had told me in our first interview in 2006, namely that she was too busy to go to the literacy classes at her church. This apparent conflict of information, together with the time it took her to tell me that she had been to literacy classes, led me to think that the classes were not of great significance for her and that she might be somewhat ambivalent about the prospect of learning to read and write. While she recognises the benefits of literacy in

principle, the reality of her situation is such that literacy, particularly of sufficient degree to make a difference to her, is unattainable.

Literacy for her is not necessarily a goal to be achieved at all costs. Although she acknowledged that literacy can lead to employment, she commented that there are too few job opportunities available and that it is unrealistic to expect that she would ever get employment, even if she were literate. She added that being employed can also entail certain disadvantages as you are the object of jealousy from people who do not have work. People can even cause problems for you so that you cannot continue in the work; either you have to give up the job or else you are sacked.

Although she holds that being literate enables you to read the Bible, and she herself desires to do this, she went on to say that literacy does not necessarily make you a better person. Being able to read the Bible does not guarantee that you will go to heaven or that you are going to obey what you read; in fact, someone who is not literate may well obey the Bible more conscientiously than someone who is literate, even if they have to rely only on what they are told.

For her, there is no connection between being unable to read and write and being ignorant or incapable of doing things. She pointed out that sometimes people who are not literate know things which literate people do not know. A non-literate person may even know something about the Bible which a literate person does not know. She applied this argument more broadly and pointed out that even education is no guarantee of greater ability or competence. People who have been to school do not necessarily know how to make good *bil-bil* nor are they always good tailors. She told me about a young girl whom she knows who has been to school and now works as a seamstress but is very poor at her work, such that her customers bring the clothes which she has made to Jean Paul, her husband, so that he can put them right. She said that people who have been to school sometimes think too highly of themselves; they go to Yaoundé to find work and then they don't want to have anything to do with working in the fields when they come back to Mowo.

Even within her women's group, she is annoyed by the literate women who, she said, look down on the other women. She commented,

« Elles se vantent car ils connaissent lire. Elles nous disent, pour vous, vous étiez où quand les gens étaient à l'école? »

They show off because they know how to read. They say, "Where were you when everyone else was at school?" (PD 135: 425)

On the one hand, she readily expresses the view that literacy is useful, but on the other hand, she is clear that it has limitations and that it does not necessarily produce practical benefits. She talks positively about the benefits of literacy at one level but then introduces qualifications about its real value for her and others. Such ambivalence may be linked

with a need to justify her failure to acquire greater literacy competencies or with the fact that her life does not require her to more competent in literacy than she is.

She adopts a similar view in relation to the education of her children, in that school might be good for them, though it would not necessarily make a big difference. In one interview in 2007, she told me that she felt that education was important because she did not want her children to be illiterate as she was. At that time, Anne and Sabie were going to the primary school but Sylvie had not yet started and the boys were too young to go. She told me that only God would know if going to school would be of any real benefit to them but she seemed to feel that there would be some intangible benefit; having some education would be good for her children, even if there were little chance that they would ever get work. She said she had never seen a Mofu girl do much with her education. However, if they went to school they would be able to learn to read and write, and also learn to speak some French which she felt might be useful. She did not see any prospect of being able to afford the much higher fees required for them to go to secondary school but overall she seemed to think that going to school was better than not going to school, even if the benefits were not immediately obvious.

My nine interviews with Rosaline over more than a year gave me a valuable insight into her view of literacy. As I visited her, I began to sense that although she was interested in literacy at one level, and could identify certain benefits for people who are literate, she did not feel that it was something to be pursued at all costs. Her view seemed to be that literacy did not necessarily make a great deal of difference to a person one way or another. In her own life, she is able to carry out the basic literacy tasks which face her and she can rely on her husband to help her with any task which is beyond her.

### **6.b Magerdawa Bimarkwa**

Magerdawa lives in the centre of the village, in Mowo II, close to the pump where women come to fill their buckets and where the water overflowing from the concrete enclosure attracts donkeys to drink, ducks to swim in the pool that has formed, and pigs to wallow in the mud. Like Rosaline, he lives in a compound made of four mud huts surrounded by a wall which helps to keep his animals secure at night. Unlike Rosaline, he lives close to other people, which perhaps accounts for his compound not having the same basically circular shape as Rosaline's. At various times he has made alterations to his compound and the remains of some of the previous structures are still evident.

He has lived in the village all his life. He is the second of three sons; his parents have now died. He has kept his father's identity card as a memento since it bears the only photograph of his father which he possesses. When I first met Magerdawa in 2006, he told me that he was 38 years old, but when he showed me his own identity card, he was recorded as having been born in 1961, which would have placed him in his mid-forties. Jean Claude and I both thought that this was inaccurate and that the figure which Magerdawa had originally given us was probably about right.





**Figure 9: Magerdawa Bimarkwa**

He is a Christian and attends the local Baptist church. He owns a copy of the Bible in Fulfulde but he was unable to show it to me as he had lent it to a friend.

Magerdawa is married to Aissatou Clémentine who is about 10 years younger than he is. She is a Giziga from Zamalao, the next village to Mowo along the main road towards Maroua. Occasionally she goes to visit her relatives there, staying with them for several days or longer. Magerdawa and Aissatou have three children; two are boys, Younas, who he said was 12 in 2006, and Neftalie, aged 8. The other is Sabie, a girl, aged 7. They had another son, Kita Raphael who was born on 10th October 1995, according to the birth certificate which Magerdawa showed me, but he died of an illness when he was 6 years old. He does not have birth certificates for his other children, so he is not sure of their dates of birth.

When I returned to visit him in 2007, he told me that since my first contact with him the previous year, he had started to look after two other children, Nathalie and Menjey, both girls, aged 5 and 3 respectively. They were the daughters of his younger brother who had been working in Yaoundé for some time selling shoes. When his brother had first gone to Yaoundé, his wife had stayed in Mowo with the children, but when he had returned in 2006, without apparently bringing anything back which showed that his time in the city had been worthwhile, she had left him. In Mofu culture, as Jean Claude later explained to me, children belong primarily to their father rather than their mother, and when a husband and wife separate, the husband will not allow his wife to take their children with her, even if she wants them. His brother, however, did not feel able to care for the children on his own, and would be returning to Yaoundé, leaving them with Magerdawa. Magerdawa was not particularly pleased to have the extra children since he felt that his circumstances

were already severely constrained and that with two additional children to look after he would be in even greater difficulties.

Being a member of a family which has been established in Mowo for a considerable time, Magerdawa owns more land than some people who have arrived more recently. He told me that he had 13 *quarts* (quarter hectares), although he could do with more as it was not enough for his needs. In 2007, he used three *quarts* for cotton, two for millet, and one for peanuts. He uses four more for dry season millet as the soil retains moisture well, so is suitable for that crop. He rents the remaining three *quarts* to others and, in order to increase his income, works on one of them for the person who has rented it. He remarked that if he were to be in particular financial difficulties he might sell some of his land but that he would only do this as a last resort. Having a lot of land involves extra work. He does not have his own donkey so instead he borrows one from a friend. He helps his friend to plough, then uses the donkey on his own fields. This means that he is late sowing his own crops but he said that it cannot be avoided.

Having enough land to be able to rent to others is clearly an advantage, but this does not protect Magerdawa from the challenges which face all farmers in the village, especially those caused by the vicissitudes of the climate. In 2006, he had been affected by the same problem as Rosaline had had the previous year, when the mayo had flooded his fields and carried away the best soil. He had only been able to grow two sacks of millet which was quite inadequate for his family. Farming near the mayo can be very productive but it entails risks. As he explained to me, not only is there the problem of flooding but also the soft sandy banks of the mayo can easily erode away so that entire fields disappear. He had already lost one field in this way. He also has some fields beside the main road close to the offices of the cotton GIC. These are well away from the mayo but, unfortunately, in 2007 he suffered the same problem of flooding, this time from rainwater running off the big mountain. Yougouda Christophe, the *agent de suivi* of the cotton GIC, told me that an attempt had been made a few years before to dig a channel for the water to flow into so that it would not flood the fields; however this had not been done successfully, and had even made matters worse, as the water was not keeping to the channel and was overflowing into fields which had not previously suffered this problem. When I left Magerdawa after my last visit on 12th June 2007, having been marooned in his compound for an hour by a torrential storm, I could see water rapidly spreading over his fields and becoming a flowing stream, making his millet plants, which were by that time about six inches tall, bend over (see Fig 10, page 99). In the two weeks between then and my final departure from the village, I saw the same fields flooded on two more occasions in the same way. Not only were the millet plants being washed away but also the flood water had deposited a layer of light-coloured infertile sand from the mountain onto the darker soil of the fields, creating a long term problem in addition to the short term problem of the flood.

The difficulty of making ends meet is as much a challenge for Magerdawa as it is for Rosaline. He has the benefit of having fields to rent which provides him with a small income and he tries to maximise this as much as possible. In 2007, a poor person in the village had asked to rent one of his fields, but he had had to refuse him in favour of another person who was able to pay him a higher rent.

He has also tried to earn some money by growing onions in the dry season. He was able to do this thanks to a second-hand water pump which he had been able to buy with the help of a Swiss nurse who used to work at the medical centre. Unfortunately, the pump had been stolen when he had lent it to a friend, leaving him only with a length of piping. However, he still intended to continue growing this crop and he showed me a large brown paper packet of small black seeds which he was planning to plant at the end of the year. He was hopeful that I might be able to buy a pump for him. I did in fact give him a sum of money towards the cost of buying a pump, but it transpired that he used this for buying millet rather than for a pump, and I had to explain that I was unable to help him further.



**Figure 10: Flooding in Magerdawa's fields**

He was aware of the *Caisse d'Epargne* in the village, but said that it was not for poor people like him, as he could not give security if he took out a loan. He did not say that he was a member of the *Mutuelle de Santé*, and it seemed unlikely that he belonged to it.

He told me that in the past he had much appreciated the help which he had received from the Swiss nurse. She had helped him with the cost of building his compound and had paid for the corrugated sheeting which I had noticed on the roof of his hut. She had also given him work and bought millet for him. This however had led his neighbours to be jealous of him and to make comments about him. They assumed that he was better off than he was in reality.

At times when he was younger, he had thought about going to Yaoundé in the hope of doing better for himself but he had decided that he ought to stay in Mowo to care for his elderly parents. His older brother had already left for Yaoundé at that time, and then his younger brother followed, so there was no alternative but for him to stay. Now, married and with his own children, as well as his brother's two children, leaving for Yaoundé was

out of the question. He frankly admitted that he hoped that staying in the village would be worthwhile, especially if I were able to give him some help.

A quotation from my notes of my interview with him on 29th January 2007 demonstrates the difficulty faced by people in Mowo to meet even the basic necessities of life.

In bringing out his identity card for us to see, he also brought out a statement from the cotton GIC showing how much fertiliser, seed and insecticide he had taken on credit at the start of the 2006 season, and what he therefore needed to pay for when the season concludes soon. This amounted to 70,000cfa. He said that he had had to sell some of the fertiliser because he needed to buy food, and Jean Claude explained to me that he would therefore have had less to put on his cotton plants, so they would not have grown so well, with the result that he would not get as much for his cotton as he might have done. (PD 92: 51)

Apparently, Magerdawa had needed food early in 2006 at the time when people growing cotton were taking their inputs of seed and fertiliser from the cotton GIC. They received these on credit which they would pay back out of the proceeds of their crop at the end of the year. Magerdawa had done the same but, instead of using the fertiliser for the purpose for which it was intended, he had sold some of it for cash to someone who wanted to buy it cheaply. Magerdawa had used the money to buy food. The consequence, however, was that he had probably had less fertiliser for his cotton than he should have done, so it was unlikely to grow as well. The result would be that the income from it would be less, even though he would have to reimburse the large amount paid for the inputs.

When I next visited him, three weeks later, he showed me the purchase note which he had been given the week before when he had taken his cotton to the collection point. It indicated that his net profit was only 11,380 cfa (£12.06) (see Fig 14, page 148). This was enough to pay for the school expenses of his children but it was less than he had expected. It had been graded as second quality, so had not attracted the same price as first quality cotton. Jean Claude suggested that this was because he had probably not done enough to remove the impurities, but Magerdawa was annoyed as he thought that he had done all that had been required. I was left wondering if his failure to apply sufficient fertiliser had also had an effect. His way of resolving his immediate need for food had only resulted in creating a longer-term problem.

It is not surprising that Magerdawa felt hopeless about his situation. He said that getting money was a constant concern and the rising cost of living made it an increasing challenge. Coping with illness is as much a challenge as having enough food. As he said,

« Autrefois, il n'y avait pas assez de problèmes chez les gens, maintenant il y a la maladie et pour guérir il faut beaucoup d'argent et tu ne peux pas faire autre chose, mais avant, quand la maladie attrape quelqu'un, et on peut guérir à un peu d'argent. Et le peu d'argent, on pouvait trouver facilement. Maintenant, avec beaucoup d'argent, on n'arrive pas toujours à guérir. »

In days gone by, people didn't have too many problems, but now there are illnesses and you need a lot of money if you're to get better. There's no other way. But in those days, when someone went down with an illness, you could get better with only a bit of money. And that bit of money, you could get it easily. Nowadays, even with a lot of money, you don't always get better. (PD 149: 35 hard copy transcription)

He said that money was more important now than it was in the past. One particular difficulty in this was that people have to manage on their own more nowadays. People, he felt, did not help one another as they had done. In the past, co-operation was essential because there were conflicts between the Mofu villages and clans and people needed to stick together for their own protection. Times have become easier in that respect, but now people are looking out only for themselves.

Given the centrality of land for the local economy and for the survival of individuals and their families, it is not surprising that conflicts often arise over the ownership and use of fields. As I recorded in my notes after listening to the recording of one interview, Magerdawa said that people take land belonging to others more or less with impunity:

In the past, people used to work together to clear fields but they don't do that now and people don't stand up for one another in land disputes for fear that the chief will take their land as well. People who take other people's land challenge them to do something about it, as they know they can't. And if they complain to the chief, the one who has taken the land cultivates it quickly in order to lay stronger claim to it. (PD 149: 11)

Magerdawa himself was in dispute with a man who farmed a field next to one of his but he felt that it was a waste of time to complain to the chief as the other man would simply give the chief some money to judge in his favour, and other people would also no doubt speak in that man's favour.

The power of literacy is well demonstrated in such situations for written documents can give greater strength to legal rights, or even create the rights. To quote again from my notes:

He does not have any papers proving his ownership and it would cost a lot to get them. However, the man who took part of his field may well go and get papers in order to make his claim incontrovertible. He said that it never used to be like this and there were strong taboos against taking other people's land. If you did take someone's lands, they would put something in the field which would cause you to die. Given that he is a Christian, he cannot take the same action against the man. (PD 149: 7)

I asked what poor people could do to protect themselves but he did not feel that there was anything they could do. Aid had to be given direct to poor people otherwise rich people get their hands on it. He did not see any way of

people taking action together because who would you go to? The chief would not listen to you because you had nothing. (PD 149: 23)

Overall, he felt pessimistic about the life which his children will have in the future. He considers that life for them will be difficult as the rising population is placing more pressure on the land, but the lack of money means that it will be impossible for his children to receive enough education to be able to find a different life for themselves. In the past, education was free, so poor children were on the same level as the children of better off families, but this is no longer the case. He seemed to feel that, like him, they would have to do the best they could in the midst of increasingly difficult circumstances.

Magerdawa did not go to school, although he could have walked to the nearest one which was in Mokong at that time. He told me that his father did not allow him to go and he needed him to help him. He regrets this as he told me that he would have learned to speak French if he had gone to school. He seems to feel that he missed an opportunity, as he pointed out that in those days people who had some education were able to get work relatively easily as there was plenty available but that this was no longer the case. His wife, Aissatou, also did not receive any formal schooling.

In spite of having no formal education, he told me that he had a position of some responsibility as the leader of a *groupe de caution* of cotton growers, a position which he had held for five years. The members of the group were all neighbours of his who had chosen him, he said, because he belonged to one of the long-standing families of the village. Being the leader of a group can be extremely difficult and is not without its problems, given that the leader may have to make up for the losses of any of his group members out of his own pocket. Constant vigilance is needed, he told me, to check what inputs his group are taking and to ensure that they are using them properly.

Being group leader also involves handling a quantity of documents from the cotton company. He showed me a number of them, including a hand written calendar for the spraying of insecticide on the cotton which he had used in 2006, the *fiche individuelle de distribution d'intrants* which listed the inputs he had taken on credit at the start of the season, another hand written list of cotton growers, including himself, who had received certain sums of money, and also copies of the Sodecoton newspaper for cotton growers (see Fig 11, page 104). Although he could read the figures on these documents, he could not read the text, even though much of it was in Fulfulde which he speaks. He told me that he could read and write figures and do calculations, and also recognise the names of the people in his group, but he could not write them. In the past, he had attended a literacy class in Fulfulde run by Sodecoton, but he had apparently not learned enough to be able to read the documents. Whenever he receives any textual matter, he said that he has to rely on help from a friend. He also needs help when making calculations to ensure that he is not making mistakes.

Having help was crucial in his view. He told me that he did not see much of a problem in being non-literate as a group leader, provided that you had a reliable person to help you. It seems that he has such a person, whom he called his *secrétaire*.

His own attitude is also important as a group leader as he is careful not to simply accept what he is told. When I asked him if he had ever had problems in the cotton group, he referred to the annual payment of the money due to the cotton growers and replied,

« Ça ne m'a arrivé. Bon, ce qui me donne la force pour prendre l'argent - les gens qui font les calculs avec les noms des gens là - quand l'argent est arrivé de Maroua, on nous appelle nous les chefs de groupe. Nous achetons les calculatrices et nous faisons les totaux. Nous appuyons la calculatrice personne par personne. Après les acheteurs font leurs calculs aussi, si ça ne tombe avec le mien, je refuse. Si ça tombe avec le mien, je signe et je prends l'argent »

That hasn't happened to me. OK, what makes me able to take the money - the people who do the figures with the names of the people, like - when the money has come from Maroua, they tell us group leaders to come. We buy calculators and we add the figures up. We do it for each person one by one. Then the buyers do their figures as well. If their figures don't match with mine, I don't take the money. If they do match with mine, I sign and take the money. (PD 86: 616)

Overall, Magerdawa did not appear to feel a strong need to develop his literacy ability beyond its present extent. He had developed his own strategies, particularly using his *secrétaire*, and these were apparently successful, at least in that he did not tell me of having any difficulties with the members of his cotton group. He can read enough to understand the marks in the school exercise books which his children show him, and he is able to help them with simple arithmetic.

If he has a major regret about his life, it is not to do with literacy but rather to do with his material circumstances. Being unable to read and write without help is not a major problem for him. The main problem is that he is poor. When I asked him how he feels about people who are literate, he replied that he sees no real difference between people who can read and write and those who cannot, and that literate people are not necessarily more intelligent. The difference is simply that literate people have had the opportunity to learn to read whereas non-literate people have not. He went on to say that being literate can even cause problems in that people who have had some education and gone on to get jobs look down on people who cannot read, even if they are Mofu like them. They do not want to help other people, a view which echoes similar sentiments expressed by Rosaline.

In making this observation, Magerdawa is implying a link between literacy and prosperity on the one hand and illiteracy and poverty on the other, at least in the sense that literacy can be a sign of education which often enables people to obtain work and live in better material circumstances than others. Such education is, however, only available to families who can afford to send their children to school, especially to secondary school. The cost of education is a real barrier to social progress in Cameroon, although this also has to be set in the context of the lack of available employment in the economic conditions which have prevailed for the last twenty years.



Figure 11: Sodecoton newspaper (French version)

Magerdawa is content to ask other people for help with literacy tasks but I noticed that this had not prevented him from misunderstanding one particular document which he showed me. This was a blue folded card, printed on both sides, and with a space for a name and address to be written by hand at the end. He explained to me that this was a voucher which would entitle him to receive millet when the government distributed food aid. When I examined the document myself, I saw that in fact it was part of a petition by a farmer’s organisation to the President and Prime Minister of Cameroon, asking them to provide subsidies for peasant farmers. At the end, the name of his son, Neftalie, had been written by hand, although it seemed to me to be unlikely that he had written it himself seeing that his father had told me that he was 8 years old and the name was written in a firm and confident manner. I had to explain to Magerdawa that the document did not give him the entitlement which he had been hoping for.

Apart from the strategy of using his *secrétaire*, Magerdawa is also investing in the education of his children which he explicitly linked with his need for help with the tasks which will face him in the future. As I noted after my visit on 29th January 2007,

He feels that it is very important for children to go to school, because they might be lucky and get a job, but even if they don't they will be able to read and write in French which is very useful. They will be able to help him when he is older. (PD 92: 31)



This is another literacy strategy, of a more long-term nature, but one which is understandable in a situation where he himself has not been able to develop independent literacy skills but has members of his family available to assist him. He appeared to be committed to making sure that his children received as much education as possible. He helped them with their schoolwork and told me that he sometimes goes to see their teachers to find out how they were progressing. He said that he intended to send his brother's two children to school once they were old enough, in spite of the cost. Not that paying school fees was easy for him, and he encouraged me to think positively about helping him to buy an irrigation pump for his onions on the grounds that the resultant profits would enable him to meet the costs of their education. He felt that the future would probably be even harder for his children than it was for him, seeing that there was more pressure on the land because of the growing population, and schooling had to be paid for, so it was hard for children to reach a high enough level for education to make much difference to their lives. He did not expect his children to progress far, and he commented that the BEPC, the primary school leaving certificate, was no longer sufficient for a young person to obtain employment. However, he felt that just being able to read and write French was something at least.

I interviewed Magerdawa once in 2006 and six times in 2007 over a period of six months. It was clear that he evidently coped to his own satisfaction with the literacy demands upon him, which were greater than those on most people because of his responsibilities as leader of the *groupe de caution*. Like Rosaline, he had developed strategies for meeting his literacy needs, which he appeared to find sufficient for his purposes. Both of them felt some regret at not being able to read and write, but they were also aware that literacy did not necessarily make a radical difference to someone's life. Their view was that learning to read and write was not an urgent necessity for them. However, they were both committed to the education of their children.

### **6.c Gabriel Belpas**

Unlike Rosaline and Magerdawa, Gabriel described himself as literate. I enjoyed interviewing him, most of the time. He is a cheerful person, with an optimistic outlook on life, who was always ready to chat. If only he had not been so eager to capitalise on his relationship with me by his wearisome importunity. I ended up approaching interviews with him with mixed feelings and sometimes had to be very firm in order to leave at the end without having to spend a considerable time listening to his financial needs.

Jean Claude told me that his blatant manner of asking for help was a sign that he was a blacksmith. Among the Mofu people, as with other language groups in Cameroon, being a blacksmith is not a profession which one chooses to take up, but rather a position in society into which one is born, rather like a caste. This is the only caste in Mofu culture apart from the potter caste for women. Just as some men are born blacksmiths, some women are born potters. Certain taboos are associated with them, particularly that blacksmiths can only marry potters and *vice versa*, so these social categories have remained fixed from one generation to another. Blacksmiths have an inferior position in society but one which nevertheless has considerable importance (Tchinda *et al.* 2003, Van Beek 1974).



**Figure 12: Gabriel Belpas and his family**

Gabriel explained to me what it meant to be a blacksmith, sitting on the ground in his entrance hut and enumerating the functions in turn by marking them off with his finger in a row in the sand. In spite of the changes affecting the Mofu people in the last century which have resulted in some diminution in the activities of the blacksmiths, they continue to occupy a distinct place in Mofu society, combining both practical and spiritual functions.

Primarily, blacksmiths are the people who, as their name suggests, forge iron. In the past, they would have made weapons for use in hunting or fighting but now their main role is limited to making agricultural implements. The blacksmiths were also the warriors of the community, being ready to use the weapons they had made, and the strength they had acquired in forging them, in order to protect their village from attack. They were also skilled hunters of game when wild animals still lived in the area.

In addition, they were, and to some extent continue to be, the undertakers of the community, digging graves, and carrying the corpses wrapped up in a shroud on their shoulders to the burial ground, before burying them with appropriate traditional religious ceremonies. Spiritually, they were the people who communicated with the ancestors and performed divination. They were also able to provide medical care and they possessed the power to create pools of water in a miraculous manner.

The reduction of their role over the last century is illustrated by Gabriel's own family. He explained that his grandfather had worked iron but had not carried out burials. His father had become a Christian; he had not conducted funerals and had also given up working iron. Gabriel was like his father; he did not work iron, although he said that he could do it if his ill-health had not reduced his strength. He also did not conduct funerals, which he expressed some distaste for on the grounds that there was the risk of catching the disease

which had caused the person's death. However, he continued to be able to provide traditional medicine for people, as he is familiar with the healing properties of local plants and herbs. He knows what to put on a wound depending on how deep it is, but he does not mend fractures. He said that he does not perform the sacrifices which would traditionally accompany medical treatment of this kind. As a Christian, he said that he knew that he should have nothing to do with traditional religious practices; although he was capable of causing a pool of water to form, he knew that he could only do this with the power of the Devil and that this was quite wrong, as the Devil always demands something from those whom he helps.

Although Gabriel was no longer a blacksmith in the traditional sense, he continues to hold this position in society. In Jean Claude's view, the habit of blacksmiths asking for financial help was due to the fact that they did not have fields of their own to cultivate. This did not entirely correspond with what Gabriel had told me, so it may be that if there is any validity in Jean Claude's view it is more to do with the fact that the blacksmiths traditionally provided many different services to the community, for which they would naturally expect some recompense.

Jean Claude later told me that he was surprised at my choice of Gabriel as a main informant but it was not clear whether this was because he was a blacksmith or more a matter of his personality or demands for money. This view was shared by Yaya André, who cooked for me. Nevertheless, I appreciated Gabriel's readiness to assist me in my research.

Like Magerdawa, Gabriel lives in Mowo II but his compound is closer to the market place. He has three grass-roofed huts where he lives with his wife, Elizabeth who, he said, was aged 28, although I felt that she looked younger, and his three children, Zachayous, Lucie and Zédéon. In my first interview with him in early 2007, he told me that they were aged 5, 3 and 1 but, after he had found the *déclarations de naissance* issued at the medical centre when they had been born, it was evident that Zachayous had already passed his sixth birthday. Gabriel said that he wanted to send him to school but he could not afford it. His first child, Yamouda Esther, had died two or three years before, at the age of six.

His mother lives in a separate compound a few yards away, and, true to Gabriel's explanation about blacksmiths and potters, I saw her making pots on one occasion when I passed.

Gabriel told me that he was 29 years old, but he went on to say that when he was 9, he was among the first pupils at the primary school in Mowo. Jean Claude told me that the school opened in 1979 and that he was one of the first teachers. He remembered teaching Gabriel. I concluded that Gabriel is probably in his early thirties. He spent six years at the school and would have liked to have continued but he was not receiving any support from his father, whom he described in disparaging terms because of this, so was unable to do so. His wife has only two years of formal schooling at most.

He was brought up in Mowo I, the old village. He comes from a large family as his father had three wives. Apart from his half siblings, he has two brothers. He has not seen the

elder since he left for Yaoundé eight years ago but his younger brother lives in Mowo. He also has four sisters who are all married; two are in the Mofu area, one in Maroua and one some 140 miles away in Garoua. His mother had two other children but they both died.

When he was nine years old, his father sent him to live with his grandfather as his father held the traditional Mofu view that some harm would come either to himself or to Gabriel because of their similarity to one another. He remained with his grandfather for some ten years, but from time to time after leaving school, he went to Ngaoundéré, where he worked in a roadside restaurant, and to Yaoundé, where he sold shoes and clothes. Since then, he has also visited other major towns in Cameroon, becoming able to express himself in French to some degree because of this experience. He has lived in his present home in Mowo II since his marriage.

Like Rosaline and Magerdawa, Gabriel is a farmer. He grows millet and peanuts but after the 2006 season he decided not to grow cotton. He owns 7 *quarts* but he is unable to farm all of this on his own so he rents out about half of it. He was eager that I should help him buy a donkey (which I did) as this would make it easier for him to farm more of his land.

He actively searches out other sources of income and at various times he buys chicken, millet, goats, and vegetables in one market and sells them in another. He sometimes looks after cattle, or helps people when they are building. During 2007, he also worked occasionally washing sheep, a task which apparently is necessary because sheep are unable to keep themselves clean. He struck me as undoubtedly a hard worker. Several times, he remarked about the importance of providing for his children, and he commented, “*Si tu n’as pas souffert là, l’argent ne vient.*” (“If you haven’t suffered, the money doesn’t come.” PD 38: 313), adding, “*Si je n’ai pas d’argent, les enfants, les petits bébés comme ça, ils pleurent, ils veulent manger.*” (“If I don’t have any money, the kids, the little ones like, they cry, they want to eat.” PD 38: 457). He had had to sell his radio the year before in order to have money to buy food.

Unfortunately, his health is not good, as he suffers from a lung problem which was diagnosed some ten years ago after he was sent for an X-ray at the medical centre in Zidim, the cost being covered by Irmgard, a German woman who was working at the *Centre de Santé* and who was an important person in his life. At times when I visited, I found him lying on his mat and sometimes our interviews would be interrupted by his coughing or by a sudden pain in his chest. However, he seemed to enjoy my visits and would often brighten up as we talked.

He is undoubtedly a generous person, and I normally benefited from some refreshments during our interviews or from some gift such as peanuts when I left. He put some effort into our relationship and sometimes, especially when I first visited, he would ask me to wait while he changed into some more respectable clothes.

He is also a person of decided and somewhat reactionary views, especially in relation to women. He commented that he was not completely in favour of education for girls since there was a risk that they might think too much of themselves and start to dominate over

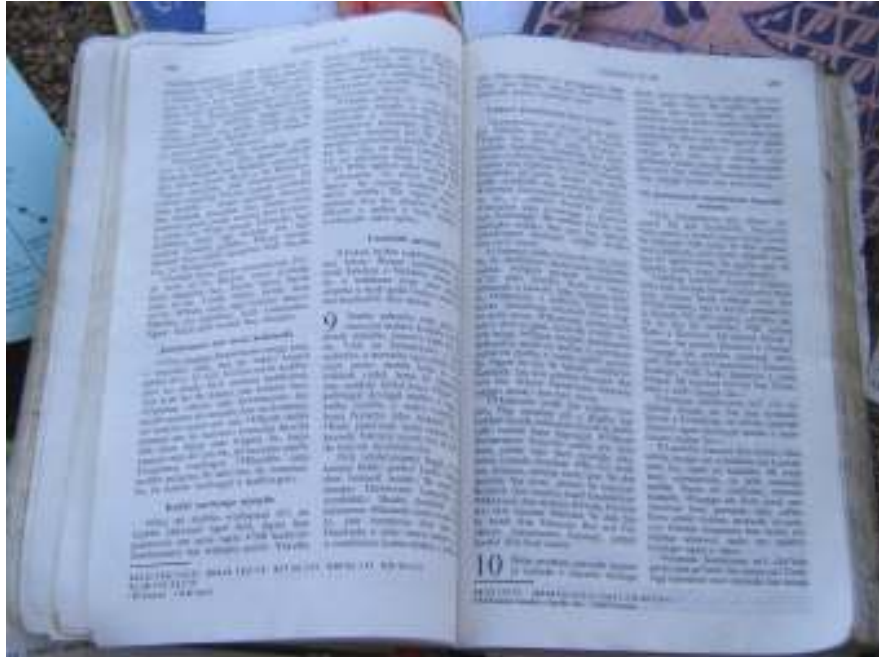
men. He argued that the Bible made it clear that women are inferior to men, and, quoting a Mofu saying, he added that women are like dogs, since if you look after them too well they end up biting you. He felt that it was good for women to be able to read so that they could read the Bible, but that too much education was dangerous as educated women whose husbands are uneducated are likely to be unfaithful to them. I have no evidence from my own observation that he treated his wife without proper respect, and indeed I saw them working together in an apparently harmonious manner when they were building a new entrance hut for their compound.

Gabriel feels that life is difficult. He compared himself to Lazarus, the poor man in the Bible who sat in squalor outside the home of the rich man and died a miserable death, although he was rewarded by a place in heaven, in contrast to the rich man. He sometimes complained of “jealousies” in the village which meant that some people did not give him work. It was hard to confirm the substance of this or whether Gabriel was affected by this more than others. It might be the result of his position in society as a blacksmith but Jean Claude thought that he was probably exaggerating the problem since he felt that it was normal for people to favour those whom they like and ignore those whom they don’t, but this perhaps confirms Gabriel’s view. However, it was clear that he had many friends in other villages as he mentioned a number of people who visited him, or whom he visited. Some, but not all, were relatives as his wife grew up in the south of the area.

Being a Christian is one of Gabriel’s defining characteristics. This is closely linked with being able to read and write. As a young man, he was befriended by Irmgard, the woman who worked at the medical centre and, he said, had asked him to marry her but he had refused, as he was too young. She had encouraged Gabriel as a young Christian, explaining the Bible to him, and also giving him work to do. He had also attended literacy classes in Fulfulde at the Baptist church, so he was familiar with this language as well as with French, which he had learned at school. Irmgard had subsequently married a Nigerian convert to Christianity and moved away from the village, much to his disappointment.

The Bible had become very important to him (see Fig 13, below), and he told me that he normally read it at least once a day during the daytime, as he did not have enough money to pay for paraffin for his lantern at night. He did not read any other text on a regular basis, saying, “*C’est devenu comme mon grand travail.*” (PD 39: 794). This could be literally translated as Bible reading being his *magnum opus*, but it conveys the thought that it is of great importance to him and that he focuses much of his energies onto it. Sometimes I would find him reading his Bible or a Bible extract in Fulfulde when I arrived to interview him.

He is very familiar with the content of the Bible and frequently retold passages or quoted verses, even if not with total accuracy. He finds the message of the Bible very relevant to his own situation in life. He is something of a Bible expert and he uses it for the benefit of other people, referring to passages from the Bible when he advises people who come to him for counsel.



**Figure 13: Gabriel's Bible**

Of all the people whom I interviewed, Gabriel made more use of literacy than anyone else. Apart from using it to support his religious faith, he also had an established role as a literacy mediator for other people, writing letters for them when they came to ask for help. Over the six-month period of my visits in 2007, he mentioned writing letters for several people, including a friend who had had to leave his job in Douala suddenly when his father had died and who needed to communicate with his employer to explain his absence and to ask him for his outstanding wages. Another letter was for a young man who wanted to write to the father of the girl he wanted to marry, pleading for patience concerning the payment of the dowry, as his own father was opposed to the marriage. Although Gabriel does not have the social status which Malan found in her research on literacy mediators in South Africa (Malan 1996b), he is nevertheless recognised by some people for his ability. Some of those who come to him for help travel from other Mofu villages even though other literate people would probably be more easily accessible to them.

Normally Gabriel writes letters in Fulfulde, but he said that he could also write in French or Mofu, the choice being dictated by what was appropriate for the person receiving the letter. He normally does this without charge, as he sees it as a way of helping other people. He seems to have become very proficient at letter writing, commenting on the importance of discussing the content of the letter carefully with the sender before starting to write, advising the sender on how to express himself well so as to create a good impression with the addressee, and making sure that the sender is in agreement with what he has written on his behalf. Usually Gabriel writes as if the letter were coming from the person he is helping but, if he knows the addressee, he may add a personal greeting of his own.

In spite of the introduction of a mobile phone service in the area, he does not see any likelihood that he will be less needed in the future as he commented that writing a letter is

much cheaper than using a mobile phone, and also that sometimes a letter is a more appropriate form of communication, especially when someone wishes to raise a delicate matter.

Gabriel's view of literacy is particularly interesting since he acknowledged the practical benefits of being able to read and write, while at the same time pointing out the limitations of literacy. His first response when I asked him whether a non-literate person might experience any disadvantages was to say,

« Obligatoirement, il est dérangé. Constate donc que si tu ne sais lire, tu vois quelqu'un pour tes documents parce que tu ne sais pas lire, non. »

Of course, he has a problem. Look, if you can't read, you have to go and see someone, don't you, to help you with your paperwork because you can't read. (PD 38: 862)

From his point of view, non-literate people suffer the particular disadvantage of not being able to read the Bible for themselves and, even though he is happy to help them when they have problems, he nevertheless believes that it is important for them to be able to read the Bible for themselves, as he is able to do. He feels that there is no substitute for being able to access the Bible directly, and being wealthy does not compensate for this. He believes that reading the Bible is the main purpose of literacy for women (see page 109). He commented also that literacy in Mofu is particularly useful for reading the Bible, even though I believe that he preferred to read and to write letters in Fulfulde.

Gabriel holds that literacy makes an important difference to people. He said,

« Voilà j'ai fréquenté là même moi, comme c'est pour toi, bon, mais c'est toi tu as déjà prendre le 1<sup>er</sup> devant moi. Et voilà les gens, ils n'étaient pas fréquentés, je suis venu 1<sup>er</sup> devant lui. » (Gabriel's words, transcribed by Jean Paul)

Hey, I went to school, I did, like you OK, but you've already come first ahead of me. And those guys, they haven't been to school, I've come first ahead of him. (PD 38: 888)

He did not elaborate this in detail, but went on to point out the practical disadvantage of illiteracy for people who are involved in the cotton industry, especially those who hold positions of responsibility, as they are much more likely to find themselves being cheated or having to cover the deficits of the members of their *groupe de caution* if they are group leaders. (I did not describe to him the strategies which Magerdawa had developed and which seemed to serve him well.)

Gabriel also feels that literacy gives him the opportunity to help other people, which he evidently likes to do.

Nevertheless, literacy has its limits. Above all, being literate is not as beneficial as having money. Discussing with Jean Claude the relative merits of literacy compared with wealth,

he pointed out that a certain amount of money was necessary before you could send your children to school, so that in a sense wealth is a prerequisite for literacy. He also took the view that being literate was of little use on its own; what made more difference to someone was having a job but that this could only be achieved through many years of education. Being educated and having a job brings status and authority,

« Tu dis à quelqu'un de fermer sa bouche, il ferme. »

You tell someone to shut up, and he shuts up. (PD 134: 170)

Conversely, being literate but also poor is of no use at all. To illustrate, he recounted how his father was in dispute with someone who worked at the medical centre who wanted to have a piece of land belonging to his father so as to build a house on it. His father did not want to sell him the land, but he was afraid that he would end up losing it, as the other would use his education and position to speak to the *sous-préfet* who would then decide in his favour. As Jean Claude commented at this point,

« Donc ici, c'est l'argent qui compte, l'écriture ça aide, ça aide seulement. »

So here, it's money that counts; literacy is just a help, just a help. (PD 134: 92)

My visits to Gabriel were particularly instructive, especially concerning the literacy practices of someone who has no high status in the village, but who nevertheless occupies a particular social role. Although people do not approach him for services to do with forging metal or for divination, as they would have done in times past, literacy has enabled him to maintain a status as an expert through his role as a literacy mediator, especially for his friends. There are other literacy mediators in Mowo but some people who ask him for help with literacy come from other Mofu villages some distance away and make a particular point of searching him out. Literacy was influential at a very basic level in the formation of Gabriel's identity. It empowered him in a way which was not possible for Rosaline and Magerdawa and it gave him a sense of status in spite of his difficult material circumstances.

Rosaline, Magerdawa and Gabriel interact with literacy each in their own way. They vary in their ability to manage the literacy tasks they face, and they make use of the help of other people to varying degrees. Yet they also share similar views on literacy, relating both to the benefits which accrue to people who are able to read and write independently, and to the very real limits of these benefits, especially in terms of the unlikelihood of literacy on its own making a substantial difference to their material circumstances, which is their greatest concern.

I will now turn to a fuller description of the views of literacy found in the Mofu community, as illustrated by others whom I interviewed.



## **7. Views of Literacy across the Mofu Community**

In the previous chapter, I focused on three particular people in Mowo and examined their life situations and their views of literacy in some depth. In this chapter, I will widen the field of vision to include the many other people whom I met and interviewed during my research in the Mofu area. All of the people whom I will quote are residents of Mowo, except for some from other villages whom I met when visiting literacy teacher training courses or literacy classes. Nevertheless, their social and material circumstances are little different from those of the majority of my informants. I intend to demonstrate that, just as with Rosaline, Magerdawa and Gabriel, the views of literacy of all my informants can best be understood in relation to the contours of their particular social situation.

For the purposes of this discussion, I will make use of the distinction which was meaningful to my informants, that of literacy and illiteracy. While such a simple dichotomy raises serious questions, and does not do justice to the varying range of ability which both literate and non-literate people have, it provides a useful structure for the present analysis. My informants readily described themselves as literate or not literate, so I will frame the following discussion within these two categories.

I will conclude with an overview of the understandings of literacy of people across the community.

### ***7.a Non-Literate People's Views of Literacy***

My detailed interviews with Rosaline and Magerdawa gave me an impression of people who are living in very difficult material circumstances and who have to make great efforts to meet their basic needs in life. They are not able to read and write, but they believe that literacy holds some value and they had developed strategies for making use of reading and writing to meet their needs, albeit with the help of others.

I interviewed a total of fifteen other non-literate people over a period of three months in 2006. They were all residents of Mowo and ranged in age from just below 30 to above 70. Seven of them were women, the remainder were men. All described themselves as not literate although some, like Rosaline, had had some contact with literacy classes but had not acquired sufficient mastery of literacy for them to change their classification of themselves. Although the constraints of time prevented me from entering into their lives in detail, it was evident that their views of literacy bore much similarity to those of Rosaline and Magerdawa. Like them, their position as non-literate people gave them a distinctive view of literacy.

The primary value of literacy which many people in this group expressed without any hesitation resided in the potential access which it gave to employment. This is not to say that they believed that literacy was an absolute prerequisite for any kind of work since many people engaged in unskilled work which did not require literacy. For instance, Rosaline or Magerdawa were paid to work in other people's fields, and Gabriel bought chicken or other animals in one market and sold them in another. Nevertheless, there was

a widespread view that literacy was useful because it was only through literacy that people could obtain the type of employment which counted, namely salaried work in an office. Such work represented the height of aspiration for many people in Mowo. As Dairou commented,

« Moi je sais seulement un peu lire et écrire mais d'autres camarades qui savent mieux que moi sont des grands fonctionnaires. S'il y a moyen, j'aimerais être comme eux. »

I just know how to read and write a bit but other guys who know more than me are high up in office jobs. If there was any way, I'd like to be like them. (PD 64: 1184)

I found that it was a common view among the non-literate people that employment of this type is only open to those who are literate. As Djaouro Koutkobei, one of the two *quartier* chiefs whom I interviewed, commented to me,

« Si on demande des employés au bureau, c'est eux qu'on viendra chercher et les illettrés n'ont pas cette chance. »

If people are looking for office workers, they [literate people] are the ones they're going to take on, and non-literate people don't have this opportunity. (PD 50: 595)

He went on to say,

« Pour devenir pasteur ou un employé quelconque, il faut passer par l'écriture et la lecture. »

To become a pastor or any sort of employee, you can't avoid reading and writing. (PD 50: 611)

Likewise, Wadi Mbedetemey knew from his own experience as a non-literate man who would have liked to have been able to work in the health centre that illiteracy stood in the way of his ever becoming an employee.

« Pour le non lettré, il se peut que en sa présence une chance lui présente. On cherche des gens lettrés pour un travail important mais, comme il est non lettré, pas du travail ... Le lettré est pris pour ce travail et il gagne son pain. »

Take a non-literate person - maybe an opportunity comes his way when someone is looking for literate people for some important job. Because he's not literate, there's no work... The literate guy is chosen and earns his daily bread. (PD 73: 722-724)

Kadiwa Tafida was disappointed for the same reason:

« Le jour où on avait recruté les gens là, si tu ne connais pas lire, tu te regrettes. Si je savais lire et écrire, je serai parmi, j'avais dit ça. »

When they took people on, like, if you didn't know how to read, you were sorry. If I'd known how to read and write, I'd have been right there with them, that's what I said. (PD 65: 765)

He was aged about 60 and too old to expect to obtain work even if he were literate but this did not prevent him regretting for what might have been if he had been able to go to school.

For Moussa Baydam, one of the twelve elders of the Baptist church, the advantage which literate people enjoyed in having the possibility of obtaining work was the first benefit of literacy which came to his mind. He also expressed some regret that his illiteracy disqualified him:

« Si je sais lire et écrire, j'allais moi aussi travailler à l'hôpital de Mowo et être maçon comme les autres camarades lettrés qui font ce travail. »

If I could read and write, I could go and work in the medical centre in Mowo and be a mason like the literate guys who are working there. (PD 72: 808)

These speakers clearly identified literacy as a means of access to employment and to an improved position in life, albeit in principle, as they readily recognised the practical difficulty of obtaining work. The economic climate in the country as a whole made the possibility of obtaining work somewhat limited, even for those with formal education qualifications, and they felt that their own personal circumstances stood in the way of their making the first step by learning to read and write. All of the speakers quoted above were men for whom employment might hold particular significance but some of my female informants who could not read and write expressed a similar connection. Literacy represented something which was very important and which had the potential to make a significant difference to their material situation, even if it was unattainable for them.

A similar linkage of literacy with employment in the minds of non-literate people or literacy learners has been noted by other researchers in many different countries (e.g. Kell 1996, Magalhães 1995, Papen 2005b). Material well-being, which is held to be the result of obtaining an income from paid work, is the goal of many people, at least where there is some possibility of work. This is not, however, a universal connection. For instance, in similar research in Mali, women who were attending literacy classes did not see literacy as giving them access to employment (Puchner 2003), nor did women in Bangladesh (Maddox 2007). In both cases, they saw literacy as offering them more modest benefits. This is understandable in a context where women occupy a social position distinct from men and where their society restricts the economic opportunities available to them. Their social situation affected the possibilities which they saw inherent in literacy. Nevertheless, the connection between literacy and employment seems to be pervasive, even in

contexts such as Mowo when it is an unrealistic aspiration. It provides a powerful rationale for literacy which even non-literate people ascribe to without hesitation.

The non-literate people quoted above drew a clear distinction between themselves and literate people on the basis that their illiteracy prevented them from obtaining employment. They had no doubt of the reality of this distinction at a wider and more fundamental level. The fact that they could not read and write, unlike literate people, was of great significance to them. In saying this, they often used a metaphor which translates into French as *dépassement* or into English as being overtaken or being outdone, with a clear implication in this context of being less capable or of knowing less than another person. Using metaphor is a normal strategy in language, as people search for a way to express what they think about something which is intangible by having recourse to words which relate to the physical world (Barton 2007:17). A wide range of metaphors have been noted in relation to literacy, and commonly these concern handicap (Searle 1999). I found a similar phenomenon in Mowo. As Saslam Kawni, who was aged about 65, remarked after Jean Claude had asked him whether he thought that literate people outdid non-literate people or *vice versa*,

« Je le dépasse avec quoi ? Il me dépasse. Lui, il écrit et moi, sauf que je connais, c'est le manger ! »

How do I outdo him? He outdoes me. He can write and I – all I know is how to eat! (PD 68: 558)

Salamatou was a young mother with three pre-school aged children. She used a similar expression to that used by Saslam when she observed the following about the typical literate person,

« Il te dépasse parce que n'importe quelle langue, lui, il connaît comme les lettres, il peut l'écrire. »

He outdoes you because, with any language you like, he knows the letters and he can write. (PD 70: 555)

Bouba Ngahuyak was a traditional healer and a blacksmith, like Gabriel, although he is at least twenty years older than him. He remarked,

« Celui qui sait lire et écrire est plus avantage. ...Il me dépasse parce que lui il sait lire et sait écrire, il me dépasse beaucoup. »

Someone who can read and write is in a better position. ...He outdoes me because he can read and write. He outdoes me by a long way. (PD 49: 611 – 615)

Ndadaw, a traditionalist and potter, who was about 45 years old, commented when asked to make the same comparison,

« Il me dépasse très bien car actuellement je me trouve bien ignorante. Je ne connais rien. »

He really outdoes me, because I'm just ignorant. I don't know anything. (PD 57: 376)

These informants compared themselves with literate people and regarded themselves as inferior to them. Being non-literate made a crucial difference and it affected their view of themselves. Although not all of my interviewees expressed this view, it was shared by many of them. For some non-literate people, such an assessment of their position in relation to others, and their desire to be like other people, can impel them to desire to extend their literacy abilities by attending literacy classes. Kayang Prisca was one such woman who had decided to attend literacy classes in her village of Zidim so that she could be like literate people.

« Cela me gêne. Quand les autres lisent la bible, moi je ne sais pas, je ne fais les regarder. Ça me dérange trop même. »

That [being non-literate] really annoys me. When the others are reading the Bible, I can't do it. All I can do is look. That really upsets me. (PD 58: 523)

Although such a desire is a much less tangible motivator than the hope of obtaining work, it can be as powerful, if not more so, and it is certainly more achievable because it does not depend on economic or social conditions beyond the individual's control. Although literacy may not have this significance for all non-literate people in other contexts (see Betts 2003), it certainly did in Mowo.

Irrespective of any particular skills which a literacy class participant learns, the simple fact of attending a literacy class can alter the way a non-literate person thinks about themselves, as was found in South Africa in a literacy class for older people for whom what mattered was the prestige of attending the class, rather than specific practical outcomes (Millican 2004). The attraction of literacy for this purpose may be particularly welcomed by women in contexts where they are culturally inferior to men as it gives them a status in relation to their husbands which is otherwise denied to them (Maddox 2005, Robinson-Pant 2000). Although the desire to improve one's status in life may not be sufficient in itself to overcome the social and practical difficulties which people face in learning to read and write, it is an outcome much valued by those who attend classes.

For some non-literate people their sense of disadvantage took a specific and practical form in that being illiterate required them to ask other people for help with literacy tasks. Thus, illiteracy became an issue of autonomy. Djidja Bakary, the wife of Bouba Ngahuyak, was one of these. She remarked,

« Comme je ne suis jamais allée à l'école, je demande des gens pour écrire mes lettres. Sinon, je fais quoi? »

I've never been to school, so I have to ask people to write letters for me. Otherwise, what do I do? (PD 49: 585)

A similar view was expressed by Wadi Mbedetemey whom I quoted above. He is about 40 years old and has eight children, one of whom he has been able to send to the secondary school in Gazawa. He would have liked to have learned to read and write at least enough to have become the *agent de suivi* in the cotton GIC but he felt that time has passed him by. Commenting on the problem of illiteracy, he remarked,

« Cela me cause beaucoup de problèmes. Quand je reçois une lettre, il faut quelqu'un pour me la lire. »

It causes me a lot of problems. When I get a letter, I need someone to read it to me. (PD 73: 578)

Such a view is not unique to the non-literate people of Mowo. The Nigerian women interviewed by Egbo (2000) pointed to the same problem of dependence on others, which contributed to their lack of self-esteem, as did the Zairean learners surveyed by Gfeller (1997).

These interviewees were conscious that being unable to read and write letters affected how they viewed themselves. At a basic level, it was also a matter of inconvenience in that they had to find someone who was literate to help them whenever they needed to read or write. This might not be easy given that the majority of Mofu adults are unable to read and write independently. It also raises important issues of trust and confidentiality. In this respect, Moussa Baydam, one of the elders of the Baptist church, was glad that he could at least rely on his children to help him if they were at home.

Djidja, Wadi and Moussa were all aware of this disadvantage of illiteracy even if they did not often receive written communications. Djaouro Koutkobei Ridjo was in a somewhat different position as he is a *quartier* chief in the village and frequently receives letters and documents of an official nature but, not being literate, he cannot read them. He was particularly conscious of the problem of dependence on others.

« Illettré que je suis, je pars voir quelqu'un lettré pour m'écrire quelque chose de très important et urgent. Je trouve mon ami absent, je parcours deux personnes absentes et je rate mon projet, et d'où l'importance de l'écriture. »

Being non-literate, I go off to see someone who's literate for them to write something for me that's very important and urgent. I find my friend's not there, and it's the same with two other people, so I end up not being able to do what I need to do. That's why being able to write is important. (PD 50: 589)

He went on to link the issue of confidentiality, particularly in matters of an official or personal nature, with that of convenience. Jean Claude translated his comments on this as follows:

« Il dit pour les lettres là, il faut donner son secrets à son ami, maintenant il faut passer par une autre qui va raconter les secrets aux autres. Ça sera 4 personnes. Lui, il m'invite pour écrire, j'ai entendu tous ses secrets. Il envoie à son ami qui ne connaît pas lire, il donne à quelqu'un, et quelqu'un l'a dit à l'autre quelqu'un. »

He says, with letters, like, he has to share his secrets with his friend, then it has to go through someone else who tells his secrets to other people. That makes four people. Let's say he asks me to write for him, so I've heard all his secrets. He sends the letter to his friend who can't read, he gives it to someone else [to read for him], and that someone tells them all to somebody else. (PD 50: 558)

Koutkobei counted a minimum of four people who would be involved in the writing and receiving of a letter as he was referring to the sender and recipient and the two literacy mediators which they would need to use, but he correctly pointed out that an indefinite number of people might become aware of the content of the correspondence, unless the two scribes could be relied upon to keep it confidential. This was an equally important issue for Djaouro Godgalam, the other *quartier* chief whom I interviewed (PD 23: 50).

The value of literacy for independence and confidentiality in personal correspondence has also been identified by literacy learners in Senegal (Fagerberg-Diallo 2001). Given the function of literacy as a communicative tool, it is not surprising that some people desire to make full use of it without having to depend on others who may not be completely trusted to keep their affairs confidential.

Djaouro Koutkobei pointed out another disadvantage of illiteracy, namely that the non-literate person is not able to use literacy to record what he wants to remember. Putting himself in the place of a literate person (as Jean Claude confirmed he was doing), he said,

« Il faut savoir qu'on ne peut pas tout retenir par tête. Il faut écrire pour ne pas oublier certaines choses. Quand j'ai mes problèmes, je les écris et je les pose sous l'oreiller. Après je les consulte de temps en temps. »

You have to realise that you can't keep everything in your head. You have to write some things down so as not to forget them. When I have things on my mind, I write them down and put them aside [lit: under my pillow]. Then I go back to them from time to time. (PD 50: 552).

Moussa Baydam, the church elder quoted above, made a similar point:

« L'homme lettré me dépasse car lui il note ce qu'on dit pour ne pas l'oublier alors moi ce n'est que la tête qui travaille. »

A literate person outdoes me because he makes a note of what someone tells him so as not to forget it, but with me, my head has to do all the work. (PD 72: 854)

Although people such as Rosaline and Djaouro Koutkobei had shown an interest in learning to read and write and had attended some literacy classes, albeit without becoming independent users of literacy, the non-literate people whom I interviewed generally took the view that there was little they could do to change their situation of disadvantage, as they described it. The view of Moussa Kawni was not untypical:

« Dieu m'a créé ainsi. Je ne pense faire autrement. »

God has made me this way. I don't think of being different. (PD 56: 356)

Most non-literate people had little difficulty in identifying various advantages of literacy, but these were not such as to lead them to seek to acquire independent literacy skills. Age was a particularly important factor affecting how these non-literate people viewed literacy. Older people were generally less positive towards literacy, especially learning to read, than younger people were. It would not be possible to propose a particular age at which a difference of view between older and younger people becomes apparent, but in general the older the person I interviewed, the less likely they were to aspire to becoming literate. This impression was reinforced by my visits to a number of literacy classes where I noticed that the great majority of the learners were younger than about 40 years old. As Mbedfawa Kifadaw, a woman aged about 50, commented in a rather vivid turn of phrase,

« Je dois faire comment? Sauf j'attends ma mort seulement. »

What can I do? I'm just waiting to die. (PD 67: 640)

A similar point was made by Djaouro Godgalam, the second quartier chief and, at 75, one of the oldest people whom I interviewed. Jean Claude translated his words as follows:

« Il dit comme Dieu ne m'a pas donné cette chance, je dois supporter comme ça. »

He says, as God hasn't given me the opportunity, I have to put up with it. (PD 95: 1257)

For these speakers, being non-literate in a community where the use of literacy is well established, at least in certain places, is a fact of life which they have come to terms with and they do not feel such a sense of deficit that it would cause them to change their view. When people are engaged in the daily challenge of meeting their immediate needs, and when the difficulty of becoming literate is outweighed by the priority of having to work to obtain money and food, it is not surprising that Moussa and others regard literacy in this light.

Equally, even if people feel disadvantaged at one level, this is tempered by the adequacy of the networks of support which they have developed to meet their literacy needs. People do not feel that being unable to read and write independently is a problem when they have other people to help them (Malan 1996a). Only Djaouro Koutkobei and Moussa Baydam



expressed the view that help was not always available when they needed it, so it seems possible that most people found that their support networks were adequate for their needs. In a context such as Mowo, where literacy does not touch closely on people's lives and where there are relatively few literacy demands on most people, such networks of support do not need to be well developed. In spite of the advantages of literacy, each non-literate person engages in a complex process of calculus in deciding whether or not to engage in literacy learning. On the one hand, they identify various benefits, but on the other, they have to take into account the effort and difficulty involved in learning and the other pressures on their time, as well as the relative necessity of doing so in view of the other resources available to them.

As I have demonstrated, the non-literate people in my study were clear that being unable to read and write created a significant distinction between themselves and literate people. They believed that they were disadvantaged to some degree in relation to literate people. They referred to being excluded from the possibility of any work which required literacy, and to the problems of dependence and lack of autonomy. In this respect, they have a strong sense of identity as non-literate people. They associate themselves with a "figured world" of non-literacy (Bartlett and Holland 2002) which is characterised by disadvantage and exclusion from the opportunities enjoyed by literate people. Many, like Moussa Kawni and Mbedfawa Kifadaw (see page 120), see it as a condition which cannot be changed, although for others, such as Kayang Prisca (see page 117) it served as the inspiration for attending literacy classes in order to be like literate people.

In spite of this evident sense of disadvantage, I was struck by the difficulty which my non-literate informants had in giving me any examples from their own experience of specific occasions when their lack of literacy skills had caused them difficulty or resulted in them suffering some loss or harm. I particularly wanted to explore this issue in view of the comments often made by literate people that people who could not read or write were likely to fall foul of the law when travelling or to run the risk of being cheated (see page 129). I had assumed that such examples would be readily forthcoming from the people who were most likely to have experienced such problems. This, however, was not the case.

The reason for this is not immediately apparent. Various explanations may be possible. One is that such specific incidents of disadvantage are not as common as might be imagined from paying attention only to the views of literate people. It is also possible that some non-literate people had indeed suffered from their illiteracy in some specific way but that this had not been of such severity that it was in the forefront of their minds when I broached this subject with them. Equally, they may have been able to think of such instances but were reluctant to talk about them as by doing so they would have run the risk of feeling embarrassed by revealing the problem which their illiteracy had caused them. To do so would then have raised the issue of why they had not taken action to acquire a degree of ability in literacy and would have implied that they were more accepting of their situation than they had claimed to be elsewhere in their discussions with me, a contradiction which they did not want to have to face. It may even be that where they had suffered problems of this kind, they did not immediately attribute this to their inability to read and write but perhaps to other factors such as the untrustworthiness of other people.

It is certainly possible that fewer instances of disadvantage occur in reality than is expressed in the public discourse, but it is also very likely that at least some non-literate people, while accepting one aspect of the discourse which asserts that there is a difference between literate and non-literate people, which they felt keenly enough, contested another aspect, namely that they, as non-literate people, are ignorant or vulnerable in relation to literate people. Both Rosaline and Magerdawa made it clear that they did not see themselves in this light (see pages 95 and 103) and, as my interviews with them and others showed, they were not completely devoid of any ability to engage with text and numbers. They had developed strategies for meeting their literacy needs when their own abilities were insufficient.

A similar phenomenon was noted in a recent study of adult learners in the north of England (Barton *et al.* 2007). Like the non-literate people in Mowo, the men and women attending classes in literacy, language or numeracy in England did not see themselves in the same way as they were represented by the official discourse as expressed in the curricula. Whereas the teaching materials tended to imply that they could be defined by their lack of particular skills, the learners themselves knew that their lives were much richer in reality and several of them possessed significant skills and creative abilities, even if they were aware that they were not as proficient in the basic skills as they desired to be. In both Mowo and England, there can be a discrepancy between how people with low literacy skills perceive themselves and how they are seen by others.

I will now continue the discussion with a consideration of literacy from the perspective of people who describe themselves as being able to read and write.

### **7.b *Literate People's Views of Literacy***

I interviewed sixteen literate Mofu people, comprising seven who were residents of Mowo and nine who came from other villages and who were in training to be literacy teachers at courses in Mokong and Zidim. All were men except for two women who were among the teacher trainees. All had been making use of literacy for some time. Ten of them had learned to read and write at primary school which they had attended for up to six years and one man had reached the first year of secondary schooling. The remainder had learned in non-formal adult literacy classes. Literacy was a well-established feature of their lives which made them able to speak with experience of what literacy meant for them.

One of them at least had full time employment, as a gardener at the medical centre. Another, Mitchibadou David, had various casual posts. He was an elder and the treasurer of his church in Gouloua, a member of the Executive Committee of his cotton GIC, and also a local agricultural advisor for an NGO. Some had leadership responsibilities in their church. All of the seven literate men from Mowo had experience of other parts of Cameroon, having lived and worked in major centres such as Garoua, Ngaoundéré and Yaoundé for periods varying from one year to fifteen years.

As the following discussion will show, the people in this group concur in some respects with the views of the non-literate people, mirroring the same points from their perspective as literate people. In other respects, their views differ.

All these informants drew a clear line of distinction between literacy and illiteracy, just as the non-literate people had done. They had little doubt that literacy was an advantage and that illiteracy was associated with disadvantage of various kinds. They also used metaphor to express this difference.

A number of them appealed to the concept of blindness when discussing illiteracy. For instance, Jean Claude commented on one occasion when Jean Claude and I were interviewing Magerdawa,

« Maintenant là, si vous ne connaissez pas lire, presque tout le monde sait lire, vous êtes là parmi eux comme un aveugle. »

Nowadays, like, if you don't know how to read - just about everyone can read - you're in the middle of them like a blind man. (PD 149: 35 transcription)

Prisca Sarabanay, a young woman who was training to be a literacy teacher, used a similar expression:

« Lire et écrire en mofu me plaisent beaucoup parce que j'aimerais savoir lire moi-même si on m'écrit en mofu. Si on écrit quelque chose en mofu dans cette église je ne veux que je sois comme un aveugle. »

I really like to read and write in Mofu because, if someone writes to me in Mofu, I want to be able to read it for myself. If someone writes something in Mofu in this church, I don't want to be like a blind person. (PD 85: 641)

She went on in the same interview to say,

« Comme tu ne sais ni lire et écrire, on reste comme cela, car on ne peut faire autrement. Ils vivent dans l'obscurité. S'il y a du travail à faire pour les lettrés, ils ne sont pas concernés. »

Since you can't read and write, you're stuck like that, because you can't do anything else. They [non-literate people] live in darkness. If there's work for literate people to do, they're excluded. (PD 85: 667)

Jacqueline, Prisca's colleague on the same course, also related illiteracy to darkness, this time of a different type:

« L'alphabétisation est très bonne car avant je dormais mais maintenant, avec les classes d'alpha, je me sens réveillée. »

Learning to read is really good because I used to be asleep but now, with the literacy classes, I feel I've woken up. (PD 85: 888)

The use of the same comparison of becoming literate with waking up has also been noted among literacy learners in Senegal (Fagerberg-Diallo 2001).

Talking about literacy rather than illiteracy, Jean Paul, Jean Claude's nephew, used a metaphor drawn from the same conceptual area. He described literacy in terms of being able to see, saying that a literate person "*a les yeux plus clairs*" ("can see better") than someone who is non-literate (PD 169: 39).

Blind people are, of course, prevented by lack of sight from knowing what is going on around them. Equally, people who are deaf have the same problem of engaging with their surroundings, albeit caused, in their case, by lack of hearing. Mamma Rosaline, a young mother attending a literacy class, described herself simply as "*une sourde*" (a deaf person, PD 93: 507) and, as Rosaline, my main informant, remarked,

« Oui, ... concernant le travail dans le groupe, si tu ne connais pas lire et écrire, tu dois rester comme une sourde alors que ceux qui savent lire et écrire, ils notent dans leur agenda que tel jour il y aura le travail à faire. »

Yes, ... with the church, if you can't read and write, you have to sit there like you were deaf, but people who can read and write, they write down in their diaries when there'll be work to do. (PD 135: 109)

Both blind and deaf people can be handicapped in their ability to participate fully in social relationships and events. The speakers cited above took the view that metaphors of handicap were an appropriate means of expressing their view of the limitations which they consider that non-literate people face in being completely involved in the life of their community, and by implication the advantage which they as literate people enjoyed.

These metaphors are very forceful. They convey an image of a stark distinction between light and darkness and between well-being and handicap. Such a concept seemed to be common among literate people.

Another equally pervasive metaphor used by literate people was that of openness. This was a broad concept with somewhat fluid boundaries and it was rather more difficult to define. It appeared to be used to describe something which was closely related to literacy but which was wider than literacy alone, although literacy was often seen as an important component of it. Openness was an attribute of people who were literate. In contrast, illiteracy was linked to being closed.

Bouba Nicholas, a translator and literacy programme organiser in the CALMO team, made an explicit link between literacy and openness. He interpreted for me when I interviewed Jacqueline, the teacher trainee whom I quoted above. When she made the following comment about literacy,

« Cela nous servent à connaître beaucoup des choses, cela rend quelqu'un sage. »

That helps us to discover lots of things, it makes someone wise.

he translated her words as,

« Ça te rend un peu intelligent, ça ouvre ton esprit. »

That makes you a bit intelligent, it opens your mind. (PD 85: 601-603)

Discussing literacy with Jean Paul, my main transcriber, it was noticeable that he identified one characteristic of openness as knowing one's rights, telling me about a non-literate man in his village who had been dispossessed of a field by his chief after a dispute with another person. He commented that non-literate people are not "*ouvert*" ("open") because they too easily accept what happens to them and do not stand up for themselves. He considers that literate people think better than non-literate people, saying "*Ton jugement marche bien.*" (PD 170: 291). On another occasion he remarked that people who are open are not easily deceived (PD 169: 39). For him, openness is achieved by going to school, although he added that an adult who learns to read and write can also become open if they make an effort.

Openness appears to be associated with the modern way of life. My discussion with Abdou Madsal, who had just returned from living in Yaoundé, was particularly illuminating. He commented that people who are "*fermé*" (closed) are still likely to practise witchcraft. He added that he had noticed a big difference in the village compared with when he left and said that the village was now more "*ouvert*". To illustrate the change, he went on to say that in times past children would run away at the sight of cars, although I suspect that this was a very long time ago (PD 48: 618). He felt that education had had a large part to play in this and he noticed that many more children were attending school than in the past. This had led to material advancement in the village, but also to a fresh attitude between people whereby, in his view, people resorted much less to witchcraft as a way of preventing others from getting ahead of them (PD 48: 670 - 690). Gabriel linked being open with making phone calls, and remarked that only people who are "*ouvert*" know how to talk to an important person on a mobile phone, so for most people writing a letter is a better option (PD 132: 400).

Literacy is an important attribute of openness even if literacy is not the only means of access to it. Both Jean Claude and Jean Paul took the view that openness is about having influence, and that this can be achieved through having money as well as through being literate. For them, openness concerns the way someone conducts themselves in the world, and is related to the influence which the person exercises in relation to others. Money enables someone, even a non-literate person, to have influence with the chief and the *sous-préfet*; this, in their view, is an example of the person being open (PD 169: 39).

It would appear therefore that, in the minds of my informants, literacy can lead to openness, particularly if basic literacy is accompanied by education, but that this connection is not absolute. Openness, however, is not only achieved through literacy. Nevertheless, the truly literate person would definitely be open.

These metaphors point in the same direction, as they make a clear distinction between literacy and illiteracy, with the former being seen as preferable compared with the latter. Both are understood in social terms, with illiteracy being associated with an inability to interact with others, whether because of a physical handicap affecting the senses or because of the person being asleep. Literacy, on the other hand, enables a person to take part in what is happening around them, and may also lead to what is perhaps best described in terms of another metaphor – enlightenment. To be literate, to be open, is to be able to take full part in society and contemporary life. Literacy is related to modernity. The “figured world” of literacy contrasts starkly with that of illiteracy (Bartlett and Holland 2002).

Just as the non-literate people whom I interviewed saw themselves as disadvantaged, my interviews with literate people revealed that they consider that they are advantaged in relation to people who cannot read and write. For at least some literate people, this advantage had a social dimension. It appeared that they felt superior to non-literate people. This was expressed most clearly by Abdou Madsal in his description (above) of the great difference between those who were open and those who were closed in their way of life and outlook. His conviction about this was strong enough to be interpreted as prejudice. As has already been noted, Rosaline was equally convinced that literate people look down on people such as herself, so it seems that this is a real feature of social attitudes in Mowo.

It might be argued therefore that literacy acts as a social marker distinguishing one group of people from another on the basis of their ability to read and write. This, however, does not do justice to the subtlety of the evidence and fails to recognise the distinction between literacy as reading and writing, and literacy in its much wider sense, as a symbol of education, material benefit and wider experience. The status which literacy can provide to some is also obtainable by others who are unable to read and write.

It should be remembered that Abdou Madsal was not just someone who could read and write; he had left the village and lived in Yaoundé for ten years where he had experienced cosmopolitan life and been able to obtain work. Similarly, the other literate men whom I quoted above had all done well for themselves through becoming literate. Jean Claude, Jean Paul, and Bouba Nicholas each had a number of years of education and they had all been able to obtain work locally. Their material circumstances were better than most, and they had also travelled at various times away from the Mofu area. They were all aware from their own experience of the advantages which literacy can offer. They may well have felt some superiority towards non-literate people but this was on the basis not of their literacy alone but of their material standing and wider experiences relative to non-literate people.

The discussion above concerning the nature of openness is illuminating of this point for it made clear that literacy is not the only means of access to the desirable attribute of openness. Having money is equally effective such that rich people can be open without necessarily being literate. Equally, being literate without becoming rich or well-off makes little substantial or material difference to people. A literate person whose ability to read and write has not led to an improvement in their material circumstances does not necessarily feel superior to people who cannot read and write. This was certainly the view of

Gabriel who, in spite of having received more education than many adults of his age in Mowo, and having lived and worked in other cities in the country, found himself living at a material level which was indistinguishable from many other people in Mowo, much to his own regret. He certainly did not feel superior to his neighbours. Material situation in life can affect how people regard one another, perhaps more than their level of literacy or education.

Some account also has to be taken of Rosaline's comments about the attitude of the literate women in her group. She certainly felt that they looked down on non-literate people such as herself. However, not having interviewed these women, it is impossible for me to be sure of their circumstances and whether they had a significantly higher level of education than the other women in the group, or were better placed materially. It may be Rosaline was particularly sensitive to feeling inferior and that the women she was alluding to in reality felt less superior to their non-literate friends than she imagined. It is impossible to be definite on this point.

I would therefore argue that, although literacy can differentiate between people and serve as a sign of social standing, this may be more the effect of material circumstances, education and personal experience than the simple ability to read and write on its own. Nevertheless, irrespective of the basis of the distinction, it is real for both literate and, especially, non-literate people.

The views of the two women who were literacy teacher trainees whom I quoted above provide additional insight on this point. If literacy alone were sufficient to raise a person's status, it might be expected that they as literate people who had had little or no formal education but had learned to read and write as adults (Prisca had had no formal schooling and Jacqueline had had only three years) would highlight this aspect of literacy. They did not however express this view. While they were aware of the advantage of literacy over illiteracy, they did not say that literacy made a fundamental difference to the social status of the person who can read and write. For them, literacy concerned acquiring a skill which non-literate people do not have and being able to do what they could not do before. This is understandable in view of their limited experience of education, so they did not regard themselves as educated in the formal sense. Similarly, the people who were attending literacy classes expressed the view that literacy was important, not for the status which they aspired to gain but for more immediate purposes and for what they would be able to do once they could read and write; they were looking forward to reading the Bible, and reading and writing letters independently. Although research with literacy learners in southern Africa has found that some aspired to literacy for its symbolic value as a sign of education and status (Papen 2005b), this did not appear to be the case with the learners I interviewed in Mowo. The social, political and economic context of learners in an urban post-apartheid context is radically different from that of learners in a rural village in Cameroon. This illustrates how the ways in which people understand literacy and its effects vary from place to place.

If literate people felt different from non-literate people, it was because of the practical and immediate benefits of literacy within their own lives, rather than for the possible change

literacy would make in their status relative to other people. Being pleased with being literate did not automatically mean that they looked with disdain on people who are not literate.

The benefits of literacy which they identified took several forms. Literate people were as aware as non-literate people were of the convenience of being able to read and write without help from others. This was the view of Gabriel (see page 111) and also of Medi Joel, a young father who finds literacy useful in his capacity as a deacon in the Baptist church in Zidim. He did not go to school and learned to read and write as an adult. He made a similar point to Gabriel:

« Quand je lis, je ne peux aller voir quelqu'un. »

When I want to read, I don't need to go and see someone. (PD 89: 491)

Arabi Wandala, the brother of the village chief in Mowo, expressed it more strongly. When Jean Claude asked him about this issue, he replied,

« Ils souffrent. S'ils veulent écrire des lettres, ils font appel à d'autres personnes. »

They [non-literate people] suffer. If they want to write letters, they have to call other people to help them. (PD 62: 862)

He went on to say that literacy was a great help to him. He had learned to read by attending the church and it had led him to obtaining a job as a gardener at the medical centre. Even in this type of manual work, literacy was useful as it enabled him to read his pay slips. As a Christian, he was also able to read the Bible.

Some people valued literacy for the autonomy and independence which it gave them. At first, when I asked some people what difference literacy made to them, I was puzzled by their response that being literate meant that they could read and write. This seemed to me to be such a truism that it was not worth stating. However, I eventually came to realise the importance of what they said. They were referring to being able to read and write on one's own, which was particularly significant for them. Sraviya Markus, a young man who had had four years of schooling and who was attending a literacy teachers training course in Mokong, made this explicit:

« Ça m'a beaucoup aidé, car si je ne suis allé à l'école, je n'allais savoir ni lire ce qui est écrit au tableau. ...Et comme le document de la Sodecoton, je ne veux donner à quelqu'un pour me les lire. Je lis moi-même. »

It [learning to read] has really helped me because if I hadn't been to school, I wouldn't know what was on the blackboard, or be able to read it. And then there's the paper from Sodecoton, I don't want to give it to someone for them to read it to me. I just read it myself. (PD 40: 637)



Being independent in literacy tasks can be an important aspect of literacy for literate people and literacy learners (Malan 1996a, Papen 2005b). The reason for this is not difficult to identify in a context where most people do not possess this ability. It gives status and self-esteem and identifies the literate person with openness and modernity.

Sraviya also took the view that lack of literacy disadvantaged non-literate people who wanted to travel outside of the Mofu area.

« Ils ne connaissent rien. Des fois ils voient des écrits sur des plaques, ils ne savent pas ce que c'est. Ils passent par là sans savoir ce que veut dire ces écrits, alors que c'est un endroit interdit d'y passer. Vient alors la souffrance et ils se lamentent. C'est ainsi les regrets de ceux qui ne savent pas lire. »

They don't understand anything. Sometimes they see signs and they don't know what they mean. They go past them without knowing what the signs say, and it's somewhere that's prohibited. Then it's all suffering and weeping. That's the sort of problem that people who can't read have. (PD 40: 659)

Another value of literacy in communication identified by my informants was that the written word can substantiate the spoken word, whereas the spoken word on its own may give rise to misunderstanding and confusion. This was the view of Yaya André who has experience of this in his role as leader of a *groupe de caution*. At the end of the season, when the time comes for him to distribute the sums due to each of the members of his group, he has to explain to them orally how the amounts they are receiving have been calculated. He cannot show them on paper, as they are unable to read. He has noticed that they may initially accept what he tells them but, after going away and thinking about it, they come back to challenge what he has said (PD 170: 235). Such disputes could, of course, easily occur even when people are able to read information they are given, but oral communication allows more room than written communication for this problem to arise. This certainly seemed to be the view of André, and also of the Sodecoton official who explained to me the process of weighing cotton (PD 10: 26). Abdoulahi Hamadou, the adult literacy coordinator at the Sodecoton regional office was of the same opinion, being convinced that literacy facilitates understanding between people (PD 20: 15).

For Jacqueline, the literacy teacher in training whom I quoted above, literacy was a real advantage for literate people in that they were less likely to be cheated. Bouba Nicholas, my interpreter when I interviewed her, raised the problem of non-literate people being sent money:

Bouba: Vous n'avez jamais entendu parler de quelqu'un qui envoie une note contenant d'argent et le non lettré n'a pas eu cette somme?

Jacqueline: Il y a beaucoup de cas pareils. Le non-lettré croit son argent normal mais par le fait de ne pas savoir lire, il ne sait pas que ce n'est pas la somme qu'on a envoyé.

Bouba: You've never heard of someone who sends a letter with some money in and the non-literate person doesn't get it?

Jacqueline: There are a lot of cases like that. The non-literate person thinks that the money is right but, because he can't read, he doesn't know that it's not the amount which he was sent. (PD 85: 701 - 703)

According to Jean Claude and Jean Paul, this sort of deception is a common occurrence. They told me of one specific case in the village of Zidim, near their own village of Mosso, when a man named Bouba had received a letter from his son, Gondji, in Yaoundé who was writing to inform him that he had given 50,000cfa (£53) for him to another man who was travelling from Yaoundé and that he should go to collect it from him. Being unable to read the letter, Bouba had asked another person to read it to him. This person, named Alfred, did so, but failed to tell Bouba about the money which was waiting for him. He had then gone to see the friend, saying that Bouba had sent him to collect it. He had not been seen in the village since (PD 170: 295).

Another example came from Marie-Louise, a nun at the Catholic church in Mokong, who told me of three young girls who had been promised 10,000 cfa (£10.60) for working in a man's field. Having done the work, it was only when they went to the market to change the bank note which he had given them that they discovered that it was in fact a 1,000 cfa note (PD 148: 41).

Jean Paul was sure that non-literate people are more vulnerable to being cheated. He gave me the example of non-literate women selling *bil-bil* in the market in Mokong who he believed were being charged three times more than was correct for their licence to trade, simply because they were not aware of the correct rate (PD 170: 297). Being able to read would not necessarily have prevented this from happening, but he felt that there was an association between being unable to read and being unwilling or unable to defend oneself. This chimed with his view that literate and educated people are more able to stand up for themselves (see page 125).

I have no reason to doubt that the examples of non-literate people being cheated are genuine but it is difficult to ascertain how frequently such incidents occur. There is a risk that occasional events of this sort can be magnified by literate people who feel a desire to emphasise the difference between themselves and non-literate people or who, like Bouba Nicholas, are literacy programme organisers or literacy teachers in training who would naturally want to promote the value of literacy as they encourage people to join their literacy classes. It is important to be able to distinguish the reality of literacy from its mythology.

There was evidently a belief which was held strongly by some people that literacy helped people protect themselves from being cheated or deceived. It is less certain how great this risk was to non-literate people. Other cases of literacy being seen in this light, by literate or non-literate people, are found in the research literature. In an evaluation study of a large literacy programme in Zaire, Gfeller (Gfeller 1997) found that some of the learners

were motivated in their attendance at literacy classes by their desire not to be cheated; literacy represented greater personal security. Similarly in India, Dyer and Choksi (1998) found that this aspect of literacy was an attraction for a group of non-literate nomads. However, such findings are by no means widespread. It may be that the informants interviewed in Zaire and in India had particular reasons for fearing that they would be cheated, but it is not easy to obtain confirmation of this. In Mowo, this did not appear to be a major concern for the non-literate people who were interviewed, even if the literate people were convinced of the validity of their view, which, to an outside observer, would seem to have some basis in reality, as the examples given by Jean Paul and others above have suggested.

Another advantage of literacy identified by some people was the ability of literacy to give people access to written information, of whatever kind. For some literate people, such as Gabriel, and for many of the literacy learners, this was access to the Bible. Others thought more generally. Adamou Yaya had gone to Yaoundé when he was 18 and had spent 15 years there finishing his primary education and working. He commented,

« Ça me donne la mémoire, je connais toutes les choses qui se passent. Pour connaître les choses dans notre monde d'aujourd'hui et même quoi. »

(Literacy) helps me to know things [lit: "gives me a memory"]. I know everything that's going on. It's useful for knowing all that's happening in the world today, and so on. (PD 63: 581-587)

Jacques Apala, one of the church elders, was also convinced of this aspect of literacy.

« Avoir fréquenté aide beaucoup. Tu peux lire beaucoup des documents, en lisant beaucoup, on est mieux cultivé. Tu es beaucoup plus renseigné dans la vie. Même dans n'importe quel travail, l'écrire et le lire nous aide beaucoup et souvent nous réussissons dans nos tâches. »

Going to school helps a lot. You can read lots of things and the more you read, the better educated you are. You're much better informed in life. Even in any kind of task, reading and writing help us a lot, and often we succeed in what we are doing. (PD 77: 872)

In this respect, Jacques was seeing literacy as important not so much for what it is in itself but what it enables the literate person to do.

It was not a major focus of my research to investigate the role of gender as a variable affecting views of literacy but some differences were clear. In the community as a whole, more women than men are non-literate and fewer girls than boys attend school. To judge from the adult literacy classes which I visited and from statistics I obtained, most literacy learners are women, an indication that they see a value in literacy and want to increase their level of competence. The interest of women in attending literacy classes has been noted elsewhere (Puchner 2003, Robinson-Pant 2000, 2001a). In Mowo, the women whom I interviewed in the Mofu literacy classes were motivated by the desire to read the

Bible. In the French literacy classes, it appeared that the girls who were attending saw the classes as an opportunity to extend the education they had already received or to make up for the lack of education where they had had little or no formal schooling. Ayowomey Pauline, who was aged 19 and attending the CROPSEC French literacy class in Mowo, was explicit about this, saying that she wanted to “*augmenter la connaissance*” (increase her knowledge), as Jean Claude translated her words (PD 75: 396). Her teacher, Marie Bahané, confirmed that many of the class were girls who had not had many years of education. Most of the learners in the French literacy class in Momboï which I visited briefly were girls who were teenagers or a little older.

It would however be unwise to attempt to draw strong conclusions about any difference between the conceptions of literacy of women as compared with men in Mowo. In two villages in Pakistan, Zubair (2001) found that gender made a considerable difference in the views of literacy which she uncovered, with men seeing literacy as primarily serving a functional purpose and women desiring to become literate for the opportunity for self-expression and self-improvement which it offered. Similarly, the women in one study in Brazil regarded literacy for its immediate benefits in their lives whereas the men favoured literacy for the longer term material benefits which they hoped to experience (Magalhães 1995). My present data would not support such conclusions in respect of the people of Mowo, and in view of the very significant social and cultural differences between Pakistan and Cameroon, and Brazil and Cameroon, it is not necessarily the case that gender would be an important determiner of attitudes to literacy.

Overall, it was clear that these literate people took a positive view of literacy and particularly emphasised the utility of literacy in enabling them to be involved in various ways in the world around them. They were glad to be literate and they shared the view that literacy gives advantage to those who are able to read and write, and that such advantage extends to a range of different areas of life.

### **7.c Conclusion**

My interviews with many people in Mowo and the wider Mofu area revealed that they held their views of literacy with some conviction, irrespective of their own level of literacy. Whether non-literate or literate, they saw literacy as a significant distinguishing mark, creating distinct categories of people, dividing those who could read from those who could not. Even if other attributes, such as wealth or education also acted as social classifiers, literacy certainly had this effect. People considered that literacy was an established feature of life in the village, and that it held benefits for those who could read and write, both in practical terms as facilitating communication and in less tangible ways as it affected how people viewed themselves.

Within this broad consensus, there were also distinct differences. Non-literate people were almost unanimous in seeing themselves in a position of disadvantage in relation to literate people, and denied the opportunities which they believed literacy offers to people who can read and write. Unlike people who were literate and who had received some education, they felt excluded from the possibility of obtaining well-paid employment. The fact that even people who were literate and had many years of education found it very

difficult to obtain employment did not diminish the strength of conviction of the non-literate people on this issue.

My non-literate informants also saw a value in literacy in enabling literate people to communicate in writing without being dependent on others and thereby being less at risk of their personal affairs becoming known abroad.

In spite of feeling disadvantaged, they found it hard to think of specific instances when their lack of reading and writing skills had caused them some particular difficulty or resulted in them suffering some material loss, an indication perhaps that such incidents are less common than is implied by the public discourse of literacy.

Among the non-literate people, many accepted that they could not read and write and did not see the need to change that situation. The older informants were particularly likely to express this view because they had lived without reading and writing for many years and also because their support networks were adequate to meet their purposes.

The literate informants were different from the non-literate informants in that many of them had completed primary education and had also had some experience of living in other parts of Cameroon. They were sure of the value of literacy which they expressed in a range of metaphors implying that literate people were better placed than non-literate people to be involved in modern life. They were glad to be literate. This view, for the most part, did not extend to them adopting a pejorative attitude towards non-literate people.

Like non-literate people, they pointed out the convenience of being able to make use of literacy without help from others and they valued the autonomy which this brought. They felt that literacy enabled them to access written information and that it served to authenticate and verify oral communication. They knew that literacy was also helpful to people who travelled, probably drawing for this on their own experience.

Their views paralleled those of the non-literate informants albeit from their perspective on the other side of the distinguishing feature of literacy which they all recognised. They did not hold any views of literacy which were opposed to those of non-literate people, although it is not easy to reconcile their conviction that literacy reduces the risk of being cheated with the absence of any indication from the non-literate informants that this was a major concern for them.

The views of literacy expressed by both the literate and non-literate people need to be understood in relation to the particular socio-economic context of their lives in Mowo, where the circumstances of life are changing through the gradual integration of the village into the wider national community, expressed in the establishment of the church and the school and the greater ease of access to the rest of the country. Life is changing and literacy is occupying a more central place. Literacy is important for people in Mowo not just as a medium of communication but also as a means of access to an improved position in life, whether materially, in the form of employment, or through the sense of greater self-worth which they experience through their ability to read and write.



## **8. The Sponsorship of Literacy in the Mofu area**

Having examined the views of literacy of Mofu people from the perspective of three individuals in Mowo (Chapter 6) and then the population in general (Chapter 7), I will now approach the topic from another complementary angle. In this chapter, I will examine how the presence and influence of major institutions and organisations in the area which make use of literacy have affected what Mofu people think about literacy and how they act in relation to it. I will make use of the concepts of literacy “sponsors” and “sponsorship” proposed by Deborah Brandt (Brandt 2001: 18). I will show how the thinking and actions of the Mofu people concerning literacy do not occur in a vacuum but are explicable partly in terms of the influence of the various sponsors of literacy in the area.

In this chapter, I will focus on the sponsorship of literacy which occurs through three main avenues, namely the churches, the schools and the cotton industry, all of which became established in Mowo in the last forty years. All make considerable use of literacy and, as they do so, encourage their own distinct literacies. These are not the only sponsors of literacy in the area but they are the most powerful and taken together serve well to illustrate the particular forms which sponsorship takes in this context and how local people respond to this sponsorship in different ways. In this discussion, I will consider how not all sponsors are equally influential.

### **8.a *Literacy Sponsorship***

The concept of “literacy sponsorship” is a broad-ranging but useful term. Literacy sponsors are “any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach and model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy - and gain advantage by it in some way” (Brandt 2001: 27). Schools are an obvious example of a sponsor, since their rationale for existence is to promote literacy and literacies which are deemed to be necessary for children growing up in society. They could also be seen as agents of society which acts as a sponsor of literacy through the educational system.

Brandt considers that literacy is a resource which has marketable value and which is therefore affected by the demands of the economy which change over time and from place to place. She compares two women who grew up in the same part of the United States, one at the beginning of the 20th century, and the other towards the end, and points out how the older woman was able to get a good job and to progress in spite of relatively limited education, whereas the younger woman, who was well educated to above the level of her peers, was only able to find unskilled work with no prospects.

As many others, Brandt takes the view that the meaning of literacy is only understandable in terms of its context. The meaning of literacy has changed in America from the beginning of the 20th century to the end. Its meaning has been affected by a social dimension and she points out how it has had a distinct identity within the African American community where it has been associated with the achievement of civil rights and the redress of social exploitation. The church has played a particularly influential role as a sponsor of literacy in this context.

Sponsorship of literacy can arise from many different sources which cannot be confined to a simple list, even one that is very long. Apart from schools, employers and churches, parents can be sponsors of literacy in relation to their children, or particular groups of people in terms of specific literacies, such as teenagers with text messaging. At a less concrete level, the economic condition of a country can also act as a sponsor, promoting, or even sometimes discouraging literacy. Brandt shows that during the course of the last century in the United States, the sources of sponsorship have become more numerous and more diffuse as literate communication has grown through the proliferation of the media and different forms of electronic communication and as the demand for specialised literacies has increased in new work contexts. The same is likely to be true in other industrialised countries. Sponsorship has also become less localised as it is exerted through global communications, touching people far removed from the sponsor. The sponsorship of literacy in English has been much promoted by the ease of international communication via the internet. As the various sources of sponsorship grow in number, new complexities arise in their relationship to one another. Often they exist side by side in a complementary manner, but sometimes rivalry can arise which occasionally can lead to conflict between them (see page 22). Even if it is now more difficult to identify discrete sponsors, the concept of sponsorship nevertheless remains valid.

Sponsorship occurs when literacy is important to particular sponsors and to those who identify with those sponsors. Brandt demonstrates how the “pull” of the sponsors meets a response in the “push” of the sponsored to achieve or obtain the literacy promoted by the sponsors (2001: 27). Personal interest becomes a motivating force as people ascribe to the values of the sponsor and desire to acquire the particular literacies of the sponsor. Brandt is clear that this force is particularly potent when literacy has an economic value, enabling people to meet their material needs through obtaining employment, or employment of particular kinds, but she recognises also the power of the less material aspects of literacy, as when literacy is associated with spiritual benefit, in the case of the church, or with other personal advantage. She gives the example of a man who was driven to learn to read by a sense of injustice after he was imprisoned for a crime.

Brandt’s concept was developed on the basis of a study of literacy in the United States, but it is equally valid in the very different cultural context of northern Cameroon. Various sponsors of literacy can be identified in Mowo and the wider Mofu area, even though literacy has been established as a social practice for a much shorter time than in America. As in America, the school and the church are strong sponsors of literacy, as I will discuss in more detail below. I will also consider the role of literacy in the cotton industry. In Mowo, some sponsorship also takes place through the important institutions of the village with which people come into contact. The medical centre is one, as are the credit union and the mutual health savings society (see page 82). The adult literacy programmes operating in the area are obvious sponsors since they exist to promote literacy.

The following discussion will focus on the sponsorship of literacy which takes in the Mofu area in the context of religion, education and agriculture.



## **8.b Religion and Literacy**

In this section, I will consider first how literacy is sponsored by the two main Christian denominations. I will then turn to the role of literacy in Islam and in traditional religion.

The close link between Christianity, literacy and education has long been recognised. In the last two centuries education has been a central plank in Christian mission strategy, together with evangelism and medicine (Beaver 1981, Falk 1979, see also Kapitzke 1995). The church continues to be influential as a user and promoter of literacy, as has been noted elsewhere in Africa (Malan 1996b, Millican 2004, Openjuru and Lyster 2007b, Papen 2005b). It was through the activities of the church that literacy first began to be promoted in the Mofu area, as the establishment of the churches preceded that of the schools. When the school was established in Mowo, the church strongly encouraged parents to send their children there.

Literacy is fundamental to the operation of the churches at a bureaucratic level, as is common in large organisations where the spoken word is inadequate for communication between parts which are spatially separated and when it is necessary for retaining a memory of discussions which have taken place and decisions which have been made. This is an example of how history is situated in literacy, as well as literacy being situated in history (Tusting 2000). Minutes need to be taken of business meetings and reports written for the regional authorities. Literacy enables the amount of money given by the congregation to be recorded and accounted. It touches the experience of the members of the churches as they take part in the Sunday services and in the various teaching classes and meetings on the church programme. In their provision of infrastructure and volunteer teachers for the Mofu literacy programme run by CALMO, the churches give substantial direct support to the promotion of literacy among adults in the area.

The churches in the Mofu area are major sponsors of literacy, although not all in equal measure. Some differences are discernable, especially between the Baptist and Catholic denominations. These find expression in the varying conceptions of literacy of their members.

### **The Baptist Church**

In the Baptist church in Mowo, literacy, particularly in Fulfulde and French, is much in evidence in the Sunday services. The men who lead the worship make use of literacy as they refer to the order of service, read from a book of prayers, or make the announcements of items of interest to the congregation. Much prominence is given in each service to the reading of one or more passages from the Bible and the exposition of them in the sermon when the preacher almost invariably refers to a previously prepared set of notes for the content of his talk.

Some people in the congregation make use of literacy when they follow the reading of the Bible in their own copy which they may have brought with them. A few people have songbooks which they use during the worship. Those in the congregation who are literate can also read the references for the Bible readings which are written in chalk in Fulfulde

and French on a blackboard at the front of the church, or the numbers of those attending and the amount given in the collection which are written on a separate blackboard alongside.

In the Baptist churches in general, literacy has been particularly significant in view of the centrality in Protestant doctrine of the Bible as the authoritative word of God, with an accompanying emphasis on individual members of the church using the Bible as a means of learning more about God and about how to live as a Christian. Some of my informants, such as Gabriel (see page 109) were deeply committed to this view. It was also expressed by Yaouba Jonatang, who was attending a literacy teachers training course in Mokong. Talking about the disadvantages faced by non-literate people, he said,

« Ils ne savent lire dans la bible qui est très importante dans l'humanité. »

They don't know how to read the Bible, which is very important for mankind.  
(PD 40: 661)

Jacques Apala, the elder in Mowo Baptist church, expressed a similar view concerning the direct value of the Bible for personal guidance:

« Même à la maison, quelqu'un peut lire sa bible et quand il lit, il découvre quelque chose qui peut lui changer le cœur... Mais pour celui qui sait lire, des fois il ouvre la bible, il trouve un passage qui dit que comme ça là, ce n'est pas bon. »

Even at home, someone can read their Bible and when he does, he discovers something that can change his heart... But for someone who can read, sometimes he opens the Bible and finds a passage which says that doing that, like, it isn't right. (PD 77: 874)

At one time, when the Baptist church was becoming established in the area, the sponsorship of literacy of the church took the form of the active promotion of literacy through a requirement that those who wanted to be baptised as members were expected to learn to read as part of the process of becoming a member. This was justifiable on the grounds that new members should be able to grow in their faith through reading the Bible, and specifically in Fulfulde, the language into which the Bible had been translated. A similar strong promotion of literacy for admission to the church has been noted in other contexts where missionary work has taken place in an environment of low literacy and education (see, for example, Besnier 1995). In the Mofu area, it appears that there has been some moderation of this policy over time. Bouba Nicholas, a Catholic, who was interpreting for me when I interviewed two Baptists who were attending a teacher training course, commented that, in the Baptist church, literacy was a condition for baptism in contrast to the practice in his own denomination (PD 40: 393). This was clarified later by Arabi Wandala who had been baptised in the Baptist church in Mowo some years ago; he told me that candidates had to show that they could read *un peu* (a little) (PD 62: 968).

Jacques Apala and Jean Aba, the two elders of the Baptist church in Mowo who gave me a great deal of information about the history of the church, were well placed to explain the current practice. They were both sure that literacy was helpful to Christians in that it enables them to understand the Bible and also the purpose of baptism. Christians who have their own Bible are able to locate Scriptural passages and follow the readings in the church services. They said, however, that literacy was not a requirement for baptism; what was more important was faith in Christ. They explained that when people are preparing for baptism they attend a course about the Christian faith, and it is helpful if they are able to read the materials which are used, but this is not essential. Likewise, when they are given a short test at the completion of the course, this is done orally, without any necessity to be able to read or write (PD 77: 1093-1121).

If literacy had at one time been a prerequisite for membership of the church, this was no longer the case. Nevertheless, the church continued to emphasise the value of individual literacy. Whereas at one time, this meant literacy in Fulfulde, increasingly literacy in Mofu was being encouraged instead. Fulfulde literacy classes had been held at the church in Mowo, but these were no longer taking place and literacy learning in Fulfulde was continuing only on an informal basis within groups such as the choirs who continue to sing Fulfulde songs. With the development of a written form for Mofu, and the publication of Bible extracts in Mofu in the last twenty-five years, the interest in Mofu has increased. Although the complete Bible in Fulfulde continues to be read and used throughout the church, it is likely to be supplanted to some extent following the publication of the New Testament in Mofu in February 2008, an event which was celebrated at a special service for the whole Mofu area held at the church in Mowo. Many people whom I interviewed were looking forward to this event, and indeed, it provided them with motivation to attend Mofu literacy classes. As Kounai Rafkatou, attending a Mofu literacy class in Zidim, said,

« J'apprends pour lire la parole de Dieu, en notre langue. Quand on sait lire on comprend mieux les évangiles et on comprend ce que cela veut dire. On sait en fulfulde, mais on ne comprend pas bien comme en ma langue. »

I'm learning so as to read the word of God in our language. When you can read, you understand the Gospels better, and you understand what it means. You know in Fulfulde, but you don't understand as well as in my language. (PD 58: 435)

Many other literacy learners expressed a similar enthusiasm and Mofu literacy classes were well attended in more than 30 churches in the area (CALMO 2007) under the auspices of the largest literacy programme in the area which I will discuss in the next chapter (see page 157). If no such classes were taking place at the Baptist church in Mowo, this was an exception and perhaps a reflection of the cosmopolitan nature of the congregation which favoured the continued usage of Fulfulde.

It can be seen, therefore, that not only is the Baptist church in the Mofu area an active user of literacy but that it sponsors a particular view of literacy for reading the Bible which is reflected in the practice and opinions of its members.

## **The Catholic Church**

The Catholic Church in the Mofu area, with the main parish church in Mokong and a number of smaller worship centres in other villages, is as much a user of literacy as the Baptist Church. Literacy serves the same bureaucratic purposes, and is useful for wider communication, which arguably extends further than the Baptist Church, through the strong organisational hierarchy of the church which links Mokong to the diocesan centre in Maroua, to the archdiocese of Garoua of which the diocese of Maroua-Mokolo is a part, and beyond the borders of Cameroon to the central church authorities in Rome.

Literacy has an important place in the services held in the church in Mokong on Sundays and other days, as I saw when I attended. The priest or catechist leading the service reads from a book containing the order of the service and prayers, and he refers to his notes when making announcements of events to the congregation. Literacy is important for the Bible readings and often three separate passages from the Bible are read in sequence during the service. Nevertheless, those who make use of literacy during the services are mainly those who are leading the worship, rather than the congregation. The congregation is not expected to read during the services and far fewer people bring a Bible or songbook to the church than do Baptist members to their services. Although the Bible has a prominent place in the services, the focus of many services is instead on the celebration of the Mass, a highly liturgical part of the service during which literacy is again practised by the priest as he reads the set prayers, but not by the congregation.

There is also an important difference between the Catholic and Baptist churches in the languages they use orally and in written communication. The main language used in the Catholic services is Mofu, rather than Fulfulde. This is on the grounds that it facilitates communication with the congregation and their understanding of the Christian message (Hollingsworth, personal communication, 2006). When necessary, what is said in Mofu is translated for the benefit of those present who are not Mofu speakers, but the translation is into French rather than Fulfulde. The readings from the Bible are also in Mofu, being taken from a prepared order of readings set by the Catholic church which has been translated into Mofu and produced locally as a printed collection of readings in a paper cover. Most of the expatriate priests of the parish have been very positive towards the use of the local language and have encouraged the translation of the Bible into Mofu (Pohlig 1999).

Fulfulde is rarely used in the church and literacy in Fulfulde has not become established in Catholic practice, as Jean Claude told me. He is a Catholic and on one occasion, as we were discussing the language and literacy practices of the different religions in the village, he commented,

« Nous qui sont de la mission catholique, nous ne connaissons pas beaucoup la langue fulfulde écrite pour faire quoi? »

Us in the Catholic church, we don't know much about written Fulfulde. What would it be for? (PD 79: 816)

Jean Claude could speak Fulfulde fluently but he had some difficulty in reading the Sodecoton newspaper in Fulfulde which Magerdawa showed him (PD 137: 8). In contrast to the Baptist church, there is no encouragement given to members to own or read the Bible in Fulfulde.

The Catholic church encourages its members to become literate but does not place the same emphasis on this as the Baptist church. There is no requirement or expectation that members will learn to read in order to be baptised or enter into full communion and, as the case of Rosaline showed (see page 93), they do not have to attend literacy classes in order to be baptised. A similar difference in attitude towards literacy has been described in Uganda in a comparison of Catholic and Anglican church practices (Openjuru and Lyster 2007b).

The promotion of literacy within the Catholic church is not specifically linked with the practice of religion. Most of the literacy classes run in the parish under the auspices of the *Comité Diocésain de Développement* are in French and respond to the desire of the learners to increase their knowledge of this language and to use it for wider communication (see page 158). The reading matter produced by the Catholic church, including the monthly magazine *En Avant*, contains a significant proportion of material relating to agriculture and development topics, which is an indication that the church promotes literacy as much for secular as for religious purposes. This literature is produced in French.

According to Jean Claude, fewer Catholics than Baptists are literate. During my visit to a confirmation preparation class at the church when about 35 people, the majority of whom were women, were receiving instruction, I noticed that only two or three of the men and none of the women had a notebook. The teaching was entirely oral, in the form of question and answer with some discussion in groups. Only those leading the sessions had books and there was no expectation that those attending would read or write anything during the event.

The Catholic church acts as a sponsor of literacy as the Baptist church does, but it does not emphasise literacy for religious purposes unlike the Baptist church, and it does not encourage literacy in Fulfulde. Its language practices are centred more on Mofu and French. As I have shown, the practices of the church are reflected in those of their members.

### **Islam and Traditional Religion**

Religion serves as a sponsor of literacy not only within the Christian denominations but also within the small Muslim community. In Christianity, the Bible has particular prominence, in Islam, the Koran occupies a central position. As Hamidou Maloum, the leader of the Muslims in Mowo, told me as we were discussing the importance of the Koran,

« Celui qui connaît lire, il fait ce que Dieu demande et il connaît la volonté de Dieu. Il ne se plaint pas de sa vie, alors que celui qui ne sait pas lire ne fait pas ce que Dieu demande et il est toujours contre Dieu de son sort. »

Someone who can read, he does what God wants, and he knows the will of God. He doesn't complain about his life, but someone who can't read doesn't do what God wants and he is always resentful towards God about his life. (PD 79: 816)

Furthermore, Abdoulaye Wandala, the village chief, who is a Muslim, commented that when he died God would ask him if he could read and would reward him for doing so (PD 78: 924). He told me that he could read and write Arabic, and a few words in French and Fulfulde, but he described himself as non-literate, an indication that he drew a sharp distinction between reading and writing in Arabic and other forms of literacy.

The distinctive features of the sponsorship of literacy by the Muslim community concern both the language and the purpose of literacy. The literacy which is particularly important for them is literacy in Arabic since this is necessary for reading the Koran and the prayers which are used in the Muslim religious practices. One of the main roles of Hamidou as the leader of the local Muslims in Mowo is to teach the children to read in Arabic, which he does in a class held most days in the afternoon after the children have returned home from the village school. This sort of literacy has a particular purpose, both for religious knowledge and as a sign of devotion with a value in its own right (Maddox 2001).

Parallel with the emphasis on literacy in Arabic, the Muslim community apparently pays little attention to literacy in Mofu. Gilbert, a literacy teacher in Zidim, told me that he had observed that the Muslims in his area were less interested in literacy in Mofu than the traditionalists (PD 51: 302). In my own experience, I was not aware of any Muslims in a Mofu literacy class. This might be explained equally by the long-standing disapproval of the local languages by Muslims in the north of Cameroon (see page 76), and by the association of Mofu literacy with the church. Literacy in French and Fulfulde are practised by Mofu Muslims such as Galla Goloved, the leader of the cotton GIC in Mowo, but this is because of their own learning and interest or their work responsibilities. It is not specifically promoted by their religion.

In contrast to the Christians and the Muslims in the Mofu area, those who practise the traditional religion do not have a sacred text. Literacy is in no way a requirement for their religious observances which are centred around actions such as sacrifices and divination, rather than around textual reading (Mbiti 1975). Traditional religion has therefore acted as a negative sponsor, suppressing the need for literacy (see the quote from Brandt on page 135). As Boubou Ngahuyak commented:

« Je fais la divination, ça me suffit. Ecrire ne me sert à rien. »

I do divination, that's enough for me. Writing is no use to me. (PD 49: 506)

All of the seven traditionalists whom I interviewed described themselves as non-literate. To some extent, this was a reflection of their age, as they had had no opportunity to attend the primary school in the village which been set up when they were already too old to attend. For those who were younger, it reflected the fact that their parents had been reluc-

tant to send them to school. However, they also had a distinctive view on literacy which was associated with their own identity as traditionalists. It was clear that the majority of them associated literacy very closely with Christianity and they therefore distanced themselves from it. As Kadiwa Tafida told me, he had spent all his life in the village and the only opportunity open to him to learn to read and write would have been at the Baptist church, but as a traditionalist he did not want to get involved (PD 28: 88). Jean Claude made it clear to me that in his view it was self-evident that traditionalists would not be literate as they were not part of the church (PD 49: 502; 57: 260). For him, literacy, at least in Mofu, was synonymous with the church.

Apart from the particular religious aspect of their view of literacy, the traditionalists regarded literacy in the same way as the rest of the community. All of them, like other non-literate people, recognised the value of literacy in principle, and they commented on its necessity for obtaining work, its usefulness for communicating by letter, and the autonomy which it provided. Like other people, they had developed strategies for using literacy by asking for help with literacy tasks from friends or members of their family.

While certain views of literacy are held by everyone in the Mofu community, as I have shown in Chapters 6 and 7, religion is an important variable affecting what people think about the purpose of literacy, and the language in which it is practised.

### **8.c     *Education and Literacy***

Schools are very powerful sponsors of literacy as their reason for existence is to teach literacy to their pupils and to enable them to make use of literacy for the purposes of their education by acquiring knowledge in the range of subjects on the school curriculum. Ultimately, they aim to equip their pupils for making a contribution to society in adult life. Reading and writing are central in almost all the activities of the school.

In the school in Mowo, lessons are typically built around the pupils reading text from the blackboard and writing it in their exercise books, and literacy is necessary for the frequent tests and exams. Text is much in evidence, whether in the textbooks which a few children possess, in the exercise books owned by most children or in the pens and pencils used for writing. The teachers make use of books for teaching lessons and for administrative purposes, and they use chalk to write on the blackboards. Notices are pinned up in the classroom. Some are posters for the benefit of the children but most of them serve an internal organisational purpose for the teachers, reminding them of the daily programme or listing the numbers of children in the classes. The teachers keep attendance registers, and the headmaster writes reports on the school for the educational authorities in Mokolo.

The school sponsors literacy in a very direct manner with the children in the classrooms as they learn their lessons. This is literacy in French, apart from in the lowest classes of the school (see page 76) as all the lessons are officially taught in this language, although this may be supplemented, even in the higher classes, with some Mofu by those teachers who are able to speak the language. The children are taught to speak French and how to read and write it, including the French style of handwriting. Literacy in Mofu for the youngest children serves only as an introduction to the more powerful literacy of French.

This expresses an important message about the relative value of the literacy in the two languages, which remains with them after they leave school.

The sponsorship of literacy by the school extends into the wider community through the literacy practices which link the school to the homes of the pupils. The children bring home their exercise books, and their parents may help them with their work, even if they themselves had not had education, as is the case with most parents. Magerdawa told me that he did this with his children when he could. They also bring home their report cards and it seems likely that even parents who are unable to read examine them and work out how well their children are doing, as was noted from research in Mexico (Kalman 2001). Similar practices were observed in a study of literacy in Uganda (Openjuru 2007).

A movement from the home to the school also takes place, since parents such as Magerdawa go to the school from time to time to ask the teachers about their children's progress or to discuss problems. It is possible that some parents may write letters to the school but I did not discover evidence of this practice during my stay in the village. Parents also attend meetings at the school, whether these are called by the school or are other meetings not associated with the school but making use of the school premises. The school serves an important purpose as a community resource in this respect, even though its location on the edge of the village makes it less accessible than other potential meeting places such as the Baptist church. The sponsorship of literacy by the school is reinforced in the process as parents who attend meetings in the classrooms, sitting at desks and reading what may be written on the blackboard, are brought within the realm of the literacy practices of the school.

The school has become well established in the life of the village since it was first set up almost thirty years ago. All the parents whom I interviewed not only accepted that the school was an important institution in village life but they also showed a practical commitment to this by making an effort to send their children to the school, even if this involved them in a financial outlay which some found difficult to meet. I felt that only one of my interviewees, a young mother who ironically lived only 200 yards from the school, showed somewhat less than total commitment when she told me that she had acquiesced to her 7 year old son when he had refused to go to the school.

Such commitment stands in distinct contrast to the attitudes of the community when schools were first established in the area. At that time, the authorities had to put pressure on the village chiefs to set an example by sending their own children to the new schools, and the chiefs in turn put pressure on the other parents, though it is possible that some may have had mixed motives in this respect. Ndadaw Taguirday told me how her father had "exchanged her for a goat" when as a young girl she was being made to go to school. Her father had given the chief a goat in return for his permission to allow him to keep her at home, which would appear to have been a good deal for the chief (PD 57: 112).

Nowadays, it is normal for children to go to school and parents make an effort to pay the costs involved. This is mostly for registration fees and exercise books, but people in the area were also willing to contribute at a recent fund raising event towards the cost of building the new secondary school in Mokong close to its boundary with Mowo. In other



villages, parents pay out of their own resources for small community schools to be set up when the nearest school is too far away for their children. They hope that one day the government will officially recognise it and take it into the state system. As has been seen with examples such as Rosaline and Magerdawa, even parents who are not seeking to become literate are committed to the education of their children.

For some parents, this commitment is not as great as it is for others. They demonstrate a rather less than enthusiastic willingness to send their children to school. Children are important within the family economy and they have responsibilities at home. They are not at a loose end if they are not at school. At one meeting of the cotton GIC which I attended, when the discussion turned to the value of education, one man commented that if children go to school then they are not at home to look after the cattle (PD 21: 32), and at various times when we were talking about schooling, Jean Claude, my interpreter, remarked that the demands of animal husbandry and agriculture continue to be an issue affecting school attendance.

Nevertheless, the change in the attitude of the parents towards the school reflects its force as a sponsor of literacy. Parents such as Alkam Moise, who did not have the opportunity to go to school as a child and had learned to read subsequently at a Sodecoton literacy class, were sure that going to school was useful. As he commented,

« L'école sert beaucoup. Cela rend les gens sages. ....Celui qui a fréquenté est différent de l'illettré. »

School is very useful. It makes people wise..... Someone who has been to school is different from a non-literate person. (PD 61: 786-794)

To illustrate this, he went on to explain that when he went to Yaoundé it took him three months before he could speak French, implying that if he had been to school he would have been able to speak French immediately.

For Haman Jean Paul, the school was important for the effect literate people have on their community. As he commented,

« L'homme instruit met son quartier en valeur, grâce à son écriture. Si non, tu mets ton quartier en valeur en quel moyen? »

The educated person brings benefit to his locality, because of writing. Otherwise, how can you do something for your locality? (PD 48: 578)

I have already made mention of the similar comments which Jacques Apala made to me on this subject (see page 131).

Yet I noticed that there were limits to how far parents would go when discussing the value of education. Although in other contexts in Africa, parents might view the school positively as the means of access to all that is modern and desirable (Egbo 2000, Malan

1996a, McEwan and Malan 1996), and as a step towards obtaining important economic capital (Bourdieu 1977), this opinion was not expressed strongly by my informants. They took a more limited view of the value of education. As Rosaline told me, education was good as it resulted in children learning to read and write, and to speak some French, even if they did not pursue their education beyond primary level (PD 91: 15). Abdoulaye Wandala, the village chief, took the view that if children did not go to school, non-literate people would not be able to find a *secrétaire* to help them, a point which was reinforced by the comments made by Magerdawa and other parents about the value they placed on the help which their children could give them with literacy tasks. However, he was guarded about any higher value in education:

« Il y a la corruption surtout. Quelque qui ne connaît rien ... il achète la place et celui qui a fait jusqu'à la licence là, il se décourage complètement et souvent, même il a ses enfants, il peut dire c'est inutile d'envoyer même les enfants à l'école.

There's corruption everywhere. Someone who knows nothing ... he buys a job, and the person who has gone right up to getting a degree, like, he gets completely discouraged, and often, even if he has children, he can say it's useless to send the children to school. (PD 78: 717)

My observations and discussions with my informants showed that the school is a strong sponsor of literacy, and particularly literacy in French, but the quotations above illustrate how at the same time its sponsorship in the village is contested. At one level, people may recognise the value of education in principle, and they can see specific benefits in it, even in simple practical terms, but the prevailing economic and social conditions in the country militate against any idealistic or excessive hopes which they might have about the greater benefits of education. This view echoes the views expressed by my informants on literacy more generally (see Chapters 6 and 7). The school does not sponsor literacy in isolation from the rest of community and national life. The school has introduced into the village concepts of literacy, and of a literacy in a particular language, which have been adopted wholeheartedly by the community, but people are also aware of the real limits of its value for their children. The wider context of the country, which translates into the poverty of many of the residents of Mowo, leads people to question whether the literacy provided by the school has a great deal to offer them. The sponsorship of literacy by the school is not without challenge and this situation is unlikely to change before an improvement in the economy of the country as a whole.

#### **8.d     *Agriculture and Literacy***

The lives of the people of Mowo centre around agriculture, since they are heavily dependent on the land for their own food and for producing crops to sell for cash. As the major source of income for many people, and because it is a highly organised activity across the whole region, the cotton industry plays an important part in local life. I will concentrate in this section on the sponsorship of literacy by this industry and discuss why its influence is less than what might be expected.

Cotton growing has been a feature of life in the north of Cameroon for many years, but its production became commercialised in the last century when the French colonial administration in sub-Saharan Africa developed its cultivation in order to supply the demand for cotton by European manufacturers and to reduce the dependence of France on the United States for its raw materials (Isaacman and Roberts 1995, Roberts 1996). As I mentioned in Chapter 4 (see page 60), the cultivation of cotton in northern Cameroon increased rapidly after the creation of a company in 1949 which took charge of the whole process from the distribution of seed to individual growers to the collection of their crop and the subsequent sale on the wholesale market. Although the profitability of this industry has varied over the years and is subject to the vagaries of the global market, cotton has made a significant impact on the region, being known as the “engine of rural development” (Roupsard 2000: 6). It is not only a source of income for many people but also Sodécoton, the cotton company, has invested heavily in the local infrastructure, ensuring, for instance, that roads in rural areas remain passable. This is primarily for the benefit of the lorries collecting the annual crop but it contributes significantly to ease of travel for local people. The cotton company is an easily accessible source of agricultural advice, equipment and fertilisers, not just for cotton. The Fairtrade scheme introduced in Mowo in 2006 has increased the amount of money received by the individual growers and their communities which are taking part in the scheme. The industry, however, is not without its critics which charge it with contributing to the exhaustion of already somewhat infertile land, and also with encouraging a dependence on the cultivation of cotton to the detriment of foodstuffs and other produce which have a value locally (Roupsard 2000).

The cotton industry is organised in a strict hierarchy with the head office in Garoua at the top and the individual cotton farmers at the bottom. In between, there are regional offices, one of which is in Maroua, sector offices, including one located on the main road between Mowo and Mokong, and the local village organisations or GICs (*groupes d'intérêt commun*). The GICs are themselves made up of *groupes de caution solidaire* consisting of a number of growers who share responsibility for each other's production (see page 66).

Literacy is indispensable to the functioning of such a large industrial enterprise which is heavily dependent on information in written form being passed from one part of the organisation to another. The cotton company is a bureaucratic as well as an industrial organisation. As it is an official company and operates over a wide area, it uses both French and Fulfulde in its communications, the latter in recognition of the fact that this language is better understood than French by people at the lower levels of the organisation. The individual local languages, such as Mofu-Gudur, are not used in official business or communications.

At village level, literacy serves to record the stocks of inputs (seed, fertiliser, pesticides) which are received from the regional office, and their distribution to the growers at the start of each season. At the end of the season, literacy is fundamental to the process of recording the amount of cotton grown by each farmer and the amount due to them after the appropriate deduction of the inputs they received on credit. Literacy is also used to record the meetings of the GIC as a whole or of its executive. It was a central part of the proceedings at the triennial election of officers by secret ballot which I attended in 2006.



acy demands they encounter in growing cotton has led many people to seek to become literate or to attend the literacy classes sponsored by Sodecoton. Among my interviewees, only Alkam Moise had attended a Sodecoton literacy class, and both Galla Goloved, the *délégué* (President) of the GIC, and Yougouda Christophe, the *agent de suivi* (technical supervisor), told me that although a few people were interested in literacy classes there was not enough interest to justify the cost involved for the GIC to send someone to a teacher training course. Although it remains true that the cotton industry is a sponsor of literacy, its effect is more limited than might be expected.

An explanation for this apparent anomaly is perhaps found in a short exchange which took place between Gabriel and Jean Claude during my first interview with him in 2006. I wanted to find out what value Gabriel saw in reading and writing, and particularly whether it had any relevance for agriculture. The conversation went as follows:

Jean Claude: Pour l'agriculture, à quoi te sert la lecture?

Gabriel: L'agriculture, n'est-ce pas?

Jean Claude: Oui.

Gabriel: Savoir lire ne sert pas pour l'agriculture.

Jean Claude: Lire ne sert pas pour l'agriculture comment ? Voilà l'engrais, lire te sert pour savoir sa dose.

Gabriel: C'est vrai.

Jean Claude: What use is literacy to you for farming?

Gabriel: Farming?

Jean Claude: Yes.

Gabriel: Knowing how to read is no use for farming.

Jean Claude: What do you mean it's no use for farming? What about fertilizer? If you can read, you know how much to put on.

Gabriel: That's true. (PD 38: 834-846)

Gabriel's first thought was that being able to read and write did not help with farming, but Jean Claude challenged him, pointing to a specific example of the usefulness of literacy. Although Gabriel apparently accepted this, I am not convinced that he was in complete agreement.

My interpretation of this exchange is that both Gabriel and Jean Claude are correct in their views. Being literate is helpful if you want to read the instructions on a sack of fertiliser, although it has to be said that this may require knowledge of French of a technical level. At the same time, Gabriel can also be seen to be justified in his view since growing crops successfully depends on a great deal more than being able to decode written information. Experience developed over years of practice is also important in helping the farmer know where and when to sow his crops and how to look after them until harvest. Useful information may be obtainable through literacy but this is only part of what is involved in successful farming. In an area where only a small amount of information is available in printed form and where much information is communicated orally, the usefulness of literacy is limited, especially when a non-literate person can often obtain help with literacy tasks from other people. Being able to read the instructions on the fertiliser packet is useful for people who are able to read, but it is not a task which is required each time the fertiliser is applied and it does not provide sufficient justification for learning to read to someone who is not literate.

This issue applies to the cultivation of cotton as much as to the agricultural industry as a whole. At one level, literacy is no more necessary for growing cotton successfully than it is for growing any other crop. Nevertheless, it is not entirely irrelevant, as the example given by Jean Claude shows. Rosaline also seemed to agree with Jean Claude when she told me that she felt that literacy would help her as a farmer (see page 94). However, literacy is less relevant for the farmer than it is for the Christian or Muslim who desires to read his sacred text, or for the parent who wishes their child to succeed at school.

The nature of the literacy which the cotton farmers encounter is also pertinent, since much of the information which is important to them is in the form of numbers rather than words. Numbers record the quantities of inputs they receive, the weight of the cotton they grow, and, most important of all, the amount of money which they are due for their crop. The important place of numeracy in economic activity has been noted elsewhere (Maddox 2001).

As the case of Magerdawa showed (see page 102), people can be more capable of reading numbers than they are of reading words and they can possess an expertise in handling numbers and doing the calculations even if they are not literate. This is an important distinction which accounts for the relatively limited impact of the cotton industry as a sponsor of literacy. Although literacy may be a benefit for farmers, it is not essential to their work, and it offers only limited benefit. Once again, the value of learning to read and write also has to be offset against the effort involved in acquiring the ability to do so, and the individual person has to take into account other, and arguably more pressing, priorities in his life.

### **8.e Conclusion**

The above discussion has illustrated how literacy is sponsored in the Mofu area by religion, education and agriculture. These are not the only sponsors of literacy since the national economy also has an effect but it is clear that, as agents of this sponsorship, the churches, schools and the cotton industry exert an influence on the attitudes and actions of Mofu people. Each represents a particular domain of life but each touches simultane-

ously on the lives of the majority of Mofu people who, at one and the same time, are Christians, cotton farmers and former school pupils, or are parents of children who are now at school, attended school in the past or will attend school in the future. The effect of these institutions on Mofu people is wide-ranging and it includes influencing their views of literacy and their literacy practices. Each of them makes considerable use of literacy for its own organisation and operations and also actively promotes the learning of literacy through provision for teaching reading and writing to those who engage with the instruction which is offered, whether by the school itself, the literacy classes taking place in churches or the classes promoted by Sodecoton. In the process, each of these sponsors promotes their own distinct literacy.

In this situation, it is pertinent to examine the influence of each of these sponsors relative to the others and how this affects the Mofu people. Each is powerful within its own domain but they are not all equally influential in the community at large. The school occupies a particularly hegemonic position since it is unchallenged as the source of education for children in the area. The churches are also particularly influential in religious practices in the community, and the cotton industry dominates agricultural activity. The power exerted by each sponsor over the literacies and attitudes of Mofu people varies in two respects, namely the nature of the literacy offered by the particular sponsor and the evaluation of that literacy by individual people.

The influence of the school is especially strong. School is seen as the source of education which offers the potential for advancement. Even if this advancement does not in fact come about for most people given the prevailing economic conditions, children are seen to be helped by the ability to read and write and to speak some French. Mofu parents have expressed this belief through their actions and it has become the norm in recent years for parents to send their children to school or at least attempt to do so for as long as their material circumstances allow. The prospect of benefit for their children, with perhaps the related expectation that whatever benefits their children will also benefit themselves, has resulted in people responding readily to the sponsorship of literacy by the school. The strong official encouragement of education by the national and local administration through their campaigns in the past to persuade parents to enrol their children, occasionally reinforced by coercive measures, has served to strengthen this effect.

The churches offer a different kind of benefit, one which is more spiritual than material. This is particularly valued by people who value the religious literacy promoted by the church which is primarily for the purpose of spiritual knowledge and growth. Spiritual motivation can be as important for some people as material motivation, and as the quotation from Jacques Apala showed (see page 138), their desire to read the Bible can be as much for its application to their immediate situation as it is for their prospect of eternal happiness.

As I have already demonstrated, the sponsorship of literacy by the cotton industry is somewhat diluted, contrary to what I had expected, but this is explicable in terms of the relative insignificance of literacy for cotton growing.

The dimension of language occupies an important place in this discussion. The school offers literacy in French, the church literacy in Fulfulde, Mofu and French (depending on the denomination), and the cotton industry literacy in French and Fulfulde. The power of the school as a sponsor of French literacy is strengthened by the status of French as the official language which offers opportunities in further education, travel and official communication which the other languages do not. Although the churches across the area promote literacy in three different languages, it is literacy in Mofu which is most attractive to local people as shown by the large numbers attending literacy classes, reaching some 905 people in 2007 (CALMO 2007). This is the language which many people identify with access to the Bible. The cotton industry's sponsorship of literacy in French and Fulfulde has met with a weaker response. It might be thought that the use of Fulfulde both in the cotton industry and in the church where it serves for access to the whole Bible might be mutually reinforcing but this has not occurred, perhaps because of the entirely distinct nature of the commercial and religious domains and the functional nature of the Sodecoton literacy classes which emphasise the literacy and numeracy skills useful in cotton farming.

It will be interesting to see whether the position of these sources of sponsorship relative to one another changes in the future. As I have already discussed in Section 5c in relation to language attitudes, Mofu people see a value in each of the languages available to them and they are more aware of complementarity between them than any conflict. The relationship between languages is never static and the introduction of writing systems for Fulfulde, and more recently, Mofu, has introduced a new element into the equation. The position of literacy in French is unchallenged and is only likely to increase as more children attend school, and, as is to be hoped, the quality of education rises, but literacy in Mofu has received a boost with the recent publication of the New Testament in the language. This is in the context of the national language policy which has warmed towards the local languages. These are now permitted as medium of instruction in schools and the recently introduced national literacy programme includes classes in these languages (see page 160). It remains to be seen whether the use of Mofu in written form will extend beyond the religious domain, and whether its possible growth will be at the expense of literacy in Fulfulde or the two literacies will exist side by side but it is certain that it now possesses a potential for increasing status which it has not had before.

Having discussed the views of literacy which I uncovered in my research, I will now explore the implications of these for the local adult literacy programmes.



## 9. Implications for Literacy Programmes

Having discussed how the local people understand literacy and how this relates to the context in which they live, I will now demonstrate how my research connects with issues of practice, especially as these concern literacy programmes and the teaching of literacy. I will examine the implications which arise from my findings, particularly as they relate to the context where the research was conducted. It is not my intention to offer a detailed evaluation or critique of the programmes operating in the area since this was not the focus of my research but I will nevertheless draw attention to some practical outworkings of my research which I consider to be relevant to the implementation of these programmes.

I will begin by summarising my most important observations regarding the Mofu context and the views about literacy of the people whom I interviewed. I will then outline the main distinguishing features of each of the literacy programmes which are currently running in the area, before turning to a discussion of the particular implications of my research as I see them. I will argue that the view of literacy as a social practice which I have taken in this research gives rise to alternative strategies in basic education programmes which can contribute to the provision of effective learning opportunities for adults in areas of incipient literacy (Besnier 1995) such as the north of Cameroon.

### 9.a *The Mofu context*

The previous chapters have presented the salient characteristics of the Mofu-Gudur area and the life of the people who live there. As has been seen, many people live in poor material circumstances, facing constant challenges to grow the food they need to live on and to obtain the money for essential expenditures, such as clothing, taxes, school fees for their children and foodstuffs which they cannot grow for themselves. It is a rural area with few possibilities of paid employment locally, except for professional jobs which are taken by people from other parts of the country who have a high level of education together with qualifications. For this reason, many local Mofu people, particularly the men, leave the area for shorter or longer periods of time in order to find work elsewhere in the country, usually in the major cities. Their remittances help to support their relatives who have remained in the village but the work they obtain is often unskilled and so the financial contribution which they are able to make to the village is not great. The prevailing economic conditions in Cameroon in the last fifteen years have made it less worthwhile for Mofu people to leave the area in search of employment elsewhere (see page 61). Most Mofu people who remain in the home area support themselves by farming for the purposes of growing their own food and selling some of their crops to obtain cash. Cotton is a popular crop but few people earn a large income from growing it.

The area is linguistically diverse in that three languages are in common use, each in particular domains of life. Mofu is the everyday language, used widely in conversations between Mofu people. Fulfulde, the regional language, is used within the Protestant churches and by people travelling outside the area. French is used for official matters since this is the language of education, government and administration. It is seen as the language of opportunity and advancement. Everyone in the area is likely to encounter

these languages to some degree in their ordinary experience, but only a minority have any substantial competence in speaking all three of them and fewer still count as able to read and write all of them.

Many adults have had little or no formal education, a situation which is changing only gradually, even though school attendance is increasing. Not all children complete the six years of primary education and only a minority of those continue into secondary education. Girls receive less education than boys, with the result that the level of literacy competence of women is lower than that of men.

Literacy as a concept is well known in the area, and I met no one who did not have some understanding of it. Whether or not they described themselves as literate, people often expressed strong views of the value of literacy, using metaphors which suggested a sharp division between those who were literate and those who were not. Many of my non-literate informants felt disadvantaged in relation to literate people, especially in being disqualified from any likelihood of paid employment. They acknowledged that finding a job necessitated formal education not just basic literacy skills.

The limited extent of literate ability in the community is paralleled by the limited availability of textual material in the area. Only a small number of people in my study possess books and the few substantial texts which are most commonly found locally tend to be of a religious nature, being the Bible or parts of the Bible translated into Fulfulde or Mofu. If people possess any textual matter it is typically limited to personal papers, such as tax receipts or health record booklets, and school exercise books belonging to their children. Nevertheless, the people in my study generally valued literacy and identified certain specific benefits in it, especially being able to access the Bible and to write letters to other people.

Being able to make use of literacy independently gave some people a sense of autonomy which they appreciated, especially when they felt that this reduced the personal risk of being dependent on others who might not be reliable or trustworthy. People who were not independent users of literacy developed strategies for making use of literacy with the help of other people who were literate. At least some non-literate people were able to manage basic literacy tasks, such as signing their name, and some were able to recognise numbers and make calculations for monetary or other purposes. Being independent as a literacy user was seen as useful but not as a necessity for meeting the most pressing demands of life.

In the community, literacy activity is concentrated mainly in the schools and the churches, with the cotton industry also making considerable use of texts which demand both literacy and numeracy. These “loci of literacy” have varying degrees of influence over the views of literacy of the people who have contact with them, as I showed in Chapter 8. Their influence can be identified in specific ways. Christians in the Protestant churches have a strong desire for literacy in Mofu so that they can read the translated portions of the Bible, and numbers of young people who have had some schooling aspire to literacy in French for the opportunities which they consider this will offer them. These groups are well represented among the participants in the local literacy programmes.

Although most of my informants placed a value on literacy, this did not mean that they sought to become literate or to extend their literacy competencies. The demanding conditions of their lives which gave little room for non-essential activities, together with the difficulty of becoming literate and the limited immediate advantages of doing so, resulted in only a small proportion of the population attending literacy classes. Nevertheless, there was consensus as to the value of literacy in principle and the great majority of parents sent their children to school.

I will now describe briefly the literacy programmes in the Mofu area before discussing how they might be impacted by the findings of my research.

### **9.b Adult Literacy Provision**

As I have shown in the previous chapters, individual people have their own understandings of literacy. The same is true of literacy programme organisers, with a profound effect on the goals, content and methodologies of their programmes. These understandings can be classified in various ways (such as by Hamilton 1996, Papen 2005c, Robinson-Pant 2001a, Rogers *et al.* 1999, and Waters 1998) but I will follow that proposed by McCaffery *et al.* (2007) whose interest is primarily in literacy in developing countries. I will locate the adult literacy programmes in the Mofu area in relation to the typology which they offer.

McCaffery *et al.* suggest that four primary views of literacy are identifiable in literacy programmes around the world. These serve as a useful theoretical typology even if, in practice, it is not always easy to identify the view of literacy underpinning a particular programme. How a programme is intended to be taught may not coincide with how it is actually taught to literacy learners for it has often been noted that literacy teachers are active agents in the implementation of literacy programmes and that they may not teach in the manner intended by the programme designers. In particular, teachers who have had limited education may have difficulty in mastering more innovative and participatory methodologies as they tend to revert to the traditional style of teaching with which they are more familiar and comfortable (Purcell-Gates and Waterman 2000, Robinson-Pant 2001a). Thus, more than one view of literacy may be evident in a literacy programme and identifying them requires some investigation. It may be necessary not only to examine the curriculum and materials used in the programme but also to interview the programme designers, teachers and learners, as well as to observe the classes being taught. Nevertheless, the typology offered by McCaffery *et al.* provides a useful frame of reference for such an investigation.

The first perspective on literacy is the traditional, school-like view which sees literacy as essentially a matter of the basic skills of reading, writing and perhaps numeracy, and as a competency which is transferable to any context or activity involving text. Programmes based on this view are likely to be structured around a set curriculum and may well make use of primers or other standardised materials in order to teach the learners the introductory skills of initial literacy such as phonological awareness, the identification of letters with sounds, and accuracy in reading and writing, emphasising, for instance, correct letter formation rather than creative expression. In this approach, language and literacy are ob-

jectified and standardised, and reading and writing are subjects of study as much as the means of access to other subjects on the curriculum.

The second view also emphasises the acquisition of basic skills but does so with recognition that these skills have particular contexts of use. This view informs programmes which see literacy as serving a functional purpose and as a matter of being able to use reading and writing in order to accomplish important tasks in life, with a particular emphasis on economic benefits for the learners. Thus, they are likely to place literacy learning in the context of real life activities and may be closely linked with work or other settings, teaching more than reading and writing alone. This is an approach favoured by major international donors and promoters of literacy in development such as UNESCO. Thus a national literacy programme for women in Uganda was linked with income generation and guided the learners through the process of establishing small businesses, providing loans as initial capital (Oxenham *et al.* 2002). Another programme in Ghana, which began in 1973 and continues to the present time, aims to equip the learners to set up and manage their own businesses as well as to tackle social issues such as health, gender and political involvement (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning 2007). Such programmes can be regarded as functional to the extent that they aim to teach the learners some kind of educational content such as health or community development alongside the basic skills of literacy.

A third view sees literacy as a social practice. This is a new approach in adult literacy programming and, as such, it is still in the process of developing a definitive and distinctive form. It could be seen as being a variant or an extension of the functional view of literacy, if the primary characteristic of the latter is seen as its focus on placing literacy learning within some aspect of the lives of the learners, but I consider that it is quite distinct. As I have discussed above, I regard as functional those literacy programmes which aim to improve the economic conditions of the learners or to provide education of a practical nature related to their lives. In contrast, the emphasis of literacy programmes based on the social practice view of literacy lies in their attention to reaching a detailed understanding of the particular social context of the learners and how literacy is used across their community. These programmes lay emphasis on extensive exploration of literacy practices in a community before the beginning of the instructional part of the programme and the development of curricula and teaching methodologies which are appropriate for the particular learners involved. In its desire to meet the needs of the learners, pedagogy based on a view of literacy as a social practice is one type of learner centred pedagogy as supported by adult learning theory (Rogers 2002) but it pays greater attention to involving the learners in the process of identifying their practices and learning needs. It is also characterised by its specific commitment to the view of literacy as a social practice, and to a critique of dominant literacies and understandings of literacy. It makes a close link between the learning of literacy and its use outside of the classroom especially through using everyday texts for real purposes in the learning process (Barton *et al.* 2007). Literacy programmes informed by this view may be targeted at particular groups who learn literacy in a contextualised way for the particular activities in which they are involved, either in formal classes or informally through engagement in tasks demanding literacy, without making firm assumptions before the beginning of the programme about the par-

ticular needs of the learners or the ways in which these needs are to be met. One such project was carried out in Nepal from 1997 to 2003 and another with older people in South Africa from 1997 to 2000 (Chitrakar 2005, Chitrakar and Maddox 2008, Millican 2004).

The last distinctive view of literacy is that of literacy as critical reflection. Programmes based on this view aim to teach literacy for the purpose of raising the learners' awareness of their social situation and equipping them to change it. The programmes designed by Paulo Freire in Brazil and the REFLECT approach to literacy which draws on it are the primary examples of this approach (Archer and Cottingham 1996, Archer and Newman 2003, Freire and Macedo 1987, Purcell-Gates and Waterman 2000).

## **CALMO**

In the Mofu area, six literacy programmes of varying types were in operation during the period of my research, or had been in the recent past. I will describe these in turn, beginning with those with the largest number of learners.

The first was the literacy programme organised by CALMO (*Comité d'Alphabétisation en Langue Mofu-Gudur*), a local NGO established some twenty-five years ago for the purpose of promoting the Mofu language in its written form and the use of literacy in the language. It is informed by the first view of literacy outlined above, that of literacy as a skill. It was created at the instigation of Ken Hollingsworth, the SIL linguist who came to the Mofu area in 1978 in order to study the language and develop an orthography for it which could then be used in the publication of original and translated texts. This has been done, primarily in conjunction with the local churches, through ASEMTRAB (*Association des Églises Mofu-Gudur pour la Traduction de la Bible*), an organisation set up for this purpose.

During my stay in the area, I attended two teacher training courses run by CALMO, one in Mokong and the other in Zidim in the southern part of the area, and also a supervisors' meeting lasting half a day. I also visited two literacy classes being taught in churches by teachers trained by CALMO, visiting each on four occasions, and interviewed the three leaders of the programme, Bouba Nicholas, Farikou David and Gondji David who provided me with much helpful information.

They explained that CALMO's main activity is to provide training for local literacy teachers. These are typically volunteers from the churches who have a few years of primary level education and who, after attending a four-day training course, start classes in their own churches. Personnel from CALMO make supervisory visits to the classes on an occasional basis.

CALMO has funded its activities from a variety of sources, primarily the Cameroon branch of SIL. In the past, it received some funding from ANACLAC (*Association Nationale des Comités de Langues Camerounaises*) which itself was funded by the Canadian International Development Agency. Apart from meeting the costs of the training courses, supervision and some occasional remuneration to the teachers, the funding has also en-

abled each of the literacy classes to be furnished with a collection of Mofu literature, contained in metal trunks or “book boxes”.

The statistics for the 2007 literacy season show that 905 learners were taking part in classes in 39 locations in the Mofu area (CALMO 2007). Of these, 57% were women and girls and the remainder were men and boys. The classes in this programme, as in all the local literacy programmes, normally start in January and continue into April as this is the period of the year when farming activities place fewest demands on local people. Classes are held on three or four afternoons each week, according to the preference of each class, and last for about two hours. The classes are open to anyone who wishes to attend but the learners all appear to be Mofu people who are members of the churches in which the classes are held. Attendance varies from one class to another and from one session to another within each class, according to the commitments of the learners on any particular day.

The programme is designed for non-literate adults. It focuses on the basic skills of reading and writing in Mofu, using a series of four primers developed expressly for the programme. The first introduces the initial concepts of literacy such as reading from left to right, the significance of the shapes of individual letters and how to hold a pen. The second and third progressively introduce the letters of the alphabet and give practice in reading them with short stories using controlled vocabulary, whereby the texts provided for reading in any lesson are composed only of the letters which have already been taught. The last contains longer texts on a variety of topics intended to increase the learners’ levels of comprehension and language awareness. Some of these topics are of an instructional nature, others are for entertainment. An additional book teaching basic numeracy is also available but numeracy did not figure in any of the lessons which I attended. No statistics are available for the number of learners studying each of the primers but, in practice, the classes make most use of the second and third primers. The focus of the teacher training courses is also on these two books. Literacy is conceived in these pedagogical materials in a decontextualised manner with most emphasis being placed on the mastery of the skills of decoding and encoding without reference to any particular domains of use.

## **CDD**

The other major literacy programme in the Mofu area is that organised by the *Comité de Développement* of the Catholic Diocese of Maroua-Mokong. According to a document given to me by one of the programme leaders, the programme ran 11 classes in the Mofu area in 2007 with 255 learners. In the whole diocese, there were 130 literacy classes with 2,720 learners, of whom 63% were women and girls. Like the CALMO programme, classes are held from January to April, for three hours a day on four days of the week, although there is some local variation. It is intended that each learner should receive 240 hours of instruction each year. This compares favourably with the amount of instruction recommended by Comings (1995) although it is not spread across the whole year.

The programme runs literacy classes throughout the diocese in the local languages and in French. Sister Aurore, the nun responsible for the programme in the Mofu area, told me that five of the local classes focus on literacy in Mofu, using the materials developed by

CALMO while six classes concentrate on literacy in French. In these, the instruction involves language as well as literacy learning, using a series of graded books produced by the programme which cover the French language, reading in French and numeracy. The reading texts at the highest of the three levels concern civic awareness, human rights and moral teaching, and the facilitators are encouraged to promote discussion around these topics. As such, it may be classified as a skills-based programme, with functional elements introduced after the initial phase of instruction.

Unlike the CALMO programme, the CDD programme is intended for young people up to the age of 25, as I learned from the diocesan literacy organiser, Tchidémé Augustin. This does not prevent older people from attending the classes, and one of the two classes which I visited was made up largely of women who were about 30 years old. Tchidémé also told me that it is common for some of the learners to drop out of the classes for a variety of reasons, such as moving away when they get married. They rejoin the classes when their circumstances permit but they often have to start again from the beginning.

This programme is also distinguished from the CALMO programme in that the teachers have a higher educational level and they receive some remuneration for their work. They are all young people and younger adults who have attended secondary school for at least four years and they are only accepted as teachers if they pass a selection test at the end of a two-week training course. They are paid approximately 8,000 cfa per month (£8.48) for the four-month teaching season, the exact amount depending on the number of hours they teach. Tchidémé told me that it is difficult to retain teachers as they often give up when they move away or find better paid employment. The learners show commitment to their learning in that each of the literacy classes has to contribute towards the cost of the programme. Each class has to pay 7,000 cfa (£7.42) at the start of every year to be accepted into the programme. Classes of 25 learners are required for the first level, but 15 learners are accepted as a viable number at the second level.

### **CROPSEC**

The third literacy programme in the area is organised by CROPSEC (*Conseil Régional des Organisations Paysannes de la Partie Septentrionale du Cameroun*), a network of local GICs which was formerly part of SAILD until it was set up as an independent organisation in 2005. It organises a literacy programme among a series of other activities supporting local development initiatives throughout the north of Cameroon. The programme is targeted at women's groups. Out of 18 classes in the Far North and North Provinces in 2007, one was being held in the Mofu area, in Mowo. I visited the organiser of the programme in Maroua on several occasions and also made one visit to the class in Mowo where I found a group of eight women, all of them younger adults, except for one woman aged about 40.

Like the Catholic CDD programme, the CROPSEC programme focuses on language and literacy learning in French, using a five level series of books covering language, reading and writing, and numeracy which were produced for the programme by SAILD. The reading texts relate to local life and many of them aim to teach development topics including health and sanitation. The French books include a detailed introduction to French

grammar, similar to that taught in schools. Classes meet for two or three hours at a time for three or four days each week between January and April. Marie Behané, the teacher, told me in 2006 that in her class in Mowo, she had 14 women enrolled at the first level, 10 at the second level and 4 at the third level. Like the CDD programme, this programme is essentially skills-based with some additional functional elements in terms of the development topics.

In this programme, as in the CDD programme, the teachers receive a remuneration which amounts to 150cfa (16p) per hour, the same as the CDD teachers.

### **Baptist Church French Class**

Another small programme in Mowo consists of the two French literacy classes run independently by a French woman, Caroline Carton, whose husband works at the Bible Institute. She is trained as an adult educator and has experience of this type of work in France. With the help of Suzanne, a Cameroonian woman, she runs two classes for local women, one for beginners taught by Suzanne and the other for those who have some experience, which she teaches. The classes meet in the Sunday School rooms of the Baptist Church, with a similar daily and weekly frequency to the other literacy programmes in the area. I visited the classes on three occasions and also interviewed Caroline and Suzanne. In 2006, there were about 12 learners in the first level group and 4 in the second level group. In the following year, Caroline told me that the latter group was discontinued for lack of interest.

The classes do not have set materials but Caroline plans the lessons before the start of each teaching season using resources at her disposal. The focus is on French language learning, literacy and numeracy, so it reveals a strongly skills-based view of literacy.

### **PNA**

The fifth literacy programme in the Mofu area is the *Programme National d'Alphabétisation*, which was recently established by the Ministry of Youth of the Cameroon government and operates across the whole country. In the Mofu area, two classes are in operation, one at Singomaksa, a *quartier* of Mokong and the other not far away at Gadala, on the other side of the mayo. I visited both classes once each and found seven women learners at Gadala and the same number of men at Singomaksa. The programme has not yet developed its own materials, so for the time being the two teachers, Mahamadou Bouba and his wife Abbé Oumarou, make use of their own experience and resources as professional schoolteachers.

The focus of these two classes is on French language, literacy and numeracy, although elsewhere in the country some classes learn literacy in the local languages. Mahamadou told me that the programme is functional as French is being taught, although I do not consider that this is sufficient justification in itself (see also Nkome 2006). However, during my visit to his class, much of the time was spent on a discussion of AIDS and the use of condoms which led me to conclude that this can appropriately be seen as a functional programme as described by McCaffery *et al.* (above). The departmental coordinator of



the programme in Mokolo, Moussa Francois, told me that he allows the teachers considerable latitude in their approach.

The programme provides the teachers with remuneration of 10,000 cfa (£10.60) per month for six months of the year. The teachers also receive a bicycle to facilitate their travel, together with an allowance of 10,000 cfa per month for its maintenance. The two classes in the Mofu area, which meet for the same period of time as the classes in the other programmes, are supervised by an official of the Ministry, based in Mokolo. There are a total of 39 classes in this programme in the *département*, many of them taught by schoolteachers.

### **Sodecoton**

Lastly, there is a literacy programme organised by Sodecoton, the cotton company. Some 110 classes were running in the whole Maroua area in 2006 but none took place during my stay in Mowo, so I was unable to visit a local class in session. There had been classes in the village at various times in the past. I interviewed Abdoulahi Hamadou, the Sodecoton regional coordinator for literacy in Maroua. He explained that the programme aims to teach basic literacy and numeracy skills to cotton growers, with a particular focus on skills which are relevant to them in their work. Literacy is taught in Fulfulde using a primer prepared by Sodecoton and is supported by a collection of booklets produced bilingually in Fulfulde and French relating to agricultural and health topics which are studied in separate groups by those who have attended the initial course. The teachers receive some remuneration for their work. This is a clear example of a functional programme in that it recruits its learners from among cotton growers and teaches literacy and numeracy as used in the cotton industry with materials designed specifically for this purpose.

These brief descriptions demonstrate the extent and range of formal literacy provision for adults in the Mofu area. While the CALMO literacy programme involves almost 1,000 learners, and the CDD programme several hundred, the other programmes are much smaller, at least as far as concerns the Mofu area. Several of the programmes focus on literacy in French, teaching the French language and literacy to the learners simultaneously, with CALMO and the Sodecoton programme being exceptions. The CALMO programme is also different from the other programmes in that the teachers do not receive any remuneration and the lessons do not include numeracy or functional content except at the post-primer level. From the information which I was given by programme organisers and my own observations, it was apparent that most of the learners in the various programmes are at the lower levels of the available courses of study and that the majority do not progress through the stages of these courses in a sequential manner until they complete the highest level.

All of the programmes adopt a school-like model of literacy based on the teaching of basic skills to individual learners in a fixed course of study, albeit in the case of some of the programmes with some functional content relating to agriculture, health or civics after an initial introduction to the basic skills of literacy. None makes use of participatory methodologies or includes income-generating activities. In this sense, they reveal that they belong to the first two types of programme identified by McCaffery *et al.* (2007) as they

are based on a view of literacy as a skill or as a functional task-related activity, rather than as a social practice or as a means of the transformation of society.

### **9.c    *Implications***

My research has shown the range of ways in which literacy is practised in the Mofu community and also the complexity of the views of literacy which are held by Mofu people. I would argue that existing literacy programmes would benefit from paying greater attention to how local people use and understand literacy, and that modifying their content and presentation accordingly might lead to an increase in their impact and effectiveness.

Literacy programmes, of course, cannot adapt their operations without due regard to the wider realities which impinge upon them, just as they do upon the wider community. The programmes have limited resources and, especially in the case of the CALMO programme, have to make use of teachers who have limited education and receive only a brief training course. Although some may argue that the social view of literacy on which this research is based necessarily implies that literacy programmes should adopt a critical literacy model using a participatory approach to learning, on the grounds that this is the pedagogical outworking of the theoretical emphasis of the social view on the ideological and political nature of literacy (Papen 2005c), it is unlikely that such a radically different approach would be possible in the Mofu-Gudur context at the present time. A considerable shift in the ideologies of the present programmes and greater human and financial resources would be necessary for this to happen. I will therefore concentrate on implications which could be put into effect more easily.

My research has shown that people have specific aims and expectations which standardised approaches are inadequate to meet. It is not enough for programme organisers to know that there is a need for literacy instruction because of statistics relating to illiteracy or through the impressions of service providers. It is important for them also to listen to their learners and potential learners to understand fully the purposes for which they want to make use of reading and writing and the role and significance of literacy in their lives (Castleton 2001). At the same time, they need to become aware of their own literacy practices and how these compare with those of their learners and the wider community (Hamilton 1999). This is important for both ideological and pragmatic reasons. Ideologically, it changes the relationship between programme providers and programme recipients and places it on a more equitable basis, with the two parties working in collaboration rather than one imposing their agenda on the other. In this way, power is shared rather than being monopolised by the service providers. Pragmatically, it ensures that what is provided as instruction matches well with what is needed and valued by the learners.

This is one of the most important tasks for programme organisers because if it is not properly addressed a conflict may arise between their aims and those of the learners, leading to frustration and disappointment for both parties. Such a discrepancy has been documented by many researchers (Betts 2003, Dyer and Choksi 1998, Kell 1996, Papen 2001, Papen 2005a, Robinson-Pant 2001a). It raises a serious issue since learners who are dissatisfied with what is available to them may either not enrol or may drop out of learn-

ing, whereas those learners who have a clear reason for their learning are more likely to persist (Comings 1995, Comings *et al.* 1999).

If programme organisers desire to reach a greater level of understanding of their learners, they could follow a qualitative approach similar to the one on which I have based this research. They would need to develop close relationships with people in their community, both those who are involved in literacy learning or others who are not. Through interviews over a period of time and involvement with them in their ordinary activities, they would be able to develop a detailed picture of their literacy practices as well as their attitudes to literacy and literacy learning. Similar research in recent years in the UK has involved extensive and sophisticated studies (Barton *et al.* 2007, Ivanič *et al.* 2007) but the underlying principles could be applied even where resources are more limited.

The research would best be carried out by programme organisers who are members of the community, as this would obviate any barriers of language and culture, but they would need to develop an “ethnographic eye” and problematise what is familiar to them. They would benefit from training and guidance, along the lines of that recently developed in India specifically for teachers of literacy and numeracy (Street *et al.* 2006).

Such a contextualised approach which seeks to tailor instructional programmes to the specificities of the learners and their context would also be supported by current adult learning theory which emphasises that adults, unlike children, are motivated to learn by identifying specific tasks which they want to accomplish and which they can only accomplish through acquiring new knowledge and skills (Brookfield 1986, Knowles *et al.* 2005, Rogers 2002). Adults are strongly self-directed in their approach to formal learning and do not willingly participate in what they see as irrelevant to their needs. They will either not enrol in formal activities which they perceive as not useful to them or, having enrolled, will drop out once they believe that their goals have been met or that the programme is no longer benefiting them. Accordingly, literacy programmes which respond to the stated desires of the learners for literacy and their intentions as to its uses are likely to receive a more positive response than those which do not take these desires and intentions into account. This, of course, presupposes that the needs of the learners have been identified.

In paying attention to identifying the expressed needs of their learners and potential learners, literacy programme organisers thereby give priority to the views of the intended beneficiaries of their programmes. This may mean putting their own agendas in a secondary place. In particular, where they have a commitment to a particular view of literacy or of literacy teaching, they may instead need to focus more on meeting the needs as expressed by the people who may participate in their programmes, whatever these may be. This has implications for the way in which organisers promote their programmes and suggests that they may have a greater response from their target populations if they emphasise how literacy can help people to meet their expressed desires rather than how literacy can contribute in a general way to the good of the community as a whole. As my interviews and observations demonstrated (Chapters 7 and 8), literacy for reading the Bible or writing letters may be of greater interest to people than literacy for growing better

cotton or for improved family nutrition. This has a bearing on how literacy programmes are presented.

Similarly, in view of the qualifications introduced by my non-literate informants regarding the sense of disadvantage which they feel (see page 122), literacy promoters may need to emphasise how literacy can enhance the already existing competencies of individuals rather than how it can make up for any presumed lack of ability or skill. This is an important distinction.

To some extent, the Sodecoton programme demonstrates how literacy teaching can be shaped to fit with the aims of its learners, although the inability of the local GIC to pay for the training of a literacy teacher meant that it was impossible for me to see how learners would respond to this approach. Such a contextualised approach could also be profitably adopted by the CALMO programme along the lines suggested by Openjuru and Lyster (2007b) in their study of literacy teaching in Uganda. An explicit link could be made between the aims and intended practices of the learners and the lessons being taught since, as has been shown in Chapters 7 and 8, the learners are motivated by the desire to read the Bible in Mofu. The CALMO teaching materials and lessons make no link with Bible reading. They apparently assume that those who learn the basic skills of literacy in the classes will apply these to reading the Bible without specific help or encouragement from the programme.

A useful link between the lesson and the aims of the learners could be made in various ways. At a simple level, the existing lessons could be supplemented by additional reading material drawn from the Bible, with for instance, a short familiar passage read on a regular basis. The choice of passage need not necessarily be restricted by the limitations imposed by the progressive introduction of phonemes and letters, as is done in this programme at the present time. Another approach would be to revise the instructional materials in such a way that the focus of the texts used for reading practice would become passages drawn from the Bible which would be of interest and relevance to the learners.

Literacy lessons conducted in this way would provide an opportunity for the learners to become familiar with the practices involved in reading the Bible. If complete texts of the New Testament were used in the classes, it would enable the learners to become familiar with the structure of the text which is divided into chapters and verses and with the skills involved in locating particular books or passages, which involves some use of numeracy. They might also have the opportunity to discuss the meaning of the text and how best to gain understanding from it.

A more radical approach, relating to the organisation of the programme, would be for the literacy classes to be organised as Bible reading groups where people would come to study the Bible together and would acquire literacy skills in the process, either incidentally or with some formal tuition. This would respond to the desire of some people, such as Rosaline, not just to read the Bible but to become more knowledgeable about its contents and to develop in their lives as Christians (see page 93). Thus, literacy would be joined to Bible reading, rather than the other way round. Such an approach has been de-

scribed as “literacy comes second” (Rogers *et al.* 1999) or as “embedded literacy” in that the learning of literacy takes place in the context of other learning (Roberts *et al.* 2005). This would also conveniently address the issue of the eight-month interval between literacy teaching seasons in which people forget much of what they have learned; such literacy learning could be organised around existing groups which are not limited by the demands of agricultural work. Groups of Christians meet on a weekly basis in their *quartiers* throughout the year when they read the Bible, pray together and discuss local issues. It would not be a big step for these to include some element of literacy teaching centred on the reading of the Bible on these occasions.

Focusing literacy learning on the text of the Bible also recognises the reality that the book which is most commonly owned by Mofu people is the Bible or portions of it, as I noted above (see page 85). The complete Bible in Fulfulde is relatively easily available and the New Testament in Mofu was published early in 2008. Some 5,000 copies of it were sold within a few weeks. More Mofu people now own the New Testament than own a literacy primer even though the New Testament costs 1,000 cfa in comparison with the two most popular primers at 350cfa each (£1.06 compared with 37p), a further indication of the interest of Mofu people in reading the Bible (Hollingsworth, personal communication, 19th March 2008).

Adopting such a strategy need not necessarily imply a failure to meet the needs of learners who were not Christians, as classes in the present form could continue to be available to them. Indeed, learners have a range of aims in attending literacy classes, as I demonstrated in chapter 7, and it is important for programmes to be as flexible as possible in meeting their needs (Gfeller 1997, McEwan and Malan 1996, Rogers 2005b). However, by adopting an approach which was more responsive to the needs of a majority of the learners, the CALMO programme would be likely to see greater numbers of people becoming involved in literacy learning and becoming more proficient in their level of literacy. At the very least, the learners would be more likely to achieve their goal of learning to read the Bible.

The creation of Bible reading groups linked with literacy is one example of how literacy learning could be brought into closer association a major sponsor of literacy in the area, in this case, the church. At the present time, literacy classes take place in the churches and they are attended by church members but the teaching is not directly connected with church activities. Only the Sodecoton programme makes such a link between literacy learning and a local institution or organisation. However, there are several such sponsors, as I discussed in Chapter 8. Formal education, as represented by the local school, is another major sponsor and a fruitful link could be made with the school in Mowo by several of the local literacy programmes. This might take the form of a “family literacy” approach in which parents of children who are attending the school would be involved in learning literacy both for their own purposes and for supporting the learning of their children (Patience 2007, Spiteri and Camilleri n.d.). This would respond to the desire of parents such as Magerdawa (see page 104) to send their children to school and to help them with the schoolwork. The literacy programmes which focus on French might consider such an initiative seeing that French is the main medium of instruction, but it would

also be appropriate for the CALMO programme which focuses on Mofu, seeing that children in the first two years of their education at the school are taught to read and write first in this language.

The link between literacy learning and the cotton industry could also be strengthened. If the cotton growers of Mowo and the neighbouring villages were interested in reviving the Sodecoton programme, more fruitful links could be developed in this context through literacy instruction being connected with the meetings and activities of the local GIC. These might be centred on discussion around the newspapers published by Sodecoton in French and Fulfulde or around information or training meetings for the growers. The Fair Trade scheme would give added impetus to this, since it places considerable emphasis on the education of growers in agricultural techniques such as those designed to promote soil fertility and sustainable management of the environment. Such an emphasis would give further opportunities for functional literacy learning.

Similarly, the other sponsors of literacy discussed in Chapter 8 could be involved in efforts by the literacy programmes to make more direct application between the content of their instruction and the application of literacy by the learners. The medical centre offers possibilities linked with its health education and outreach programme (see page 64), and both the Caisse d'Epargne and the Mutuelle de Santé would be appropriate centres for literacy related to personal finances and financial management.

As has been described above, several of the programmes focus on literacy in French and many of the learners in these programmes are younger people who want to improve their knowledge of French and to increase their competence in literacy. These programmes appear to be effective in offering an instructional programme which responds to the felt needs of the learners and, from my observation, they are effective to varying degrees in their teaching methodologies.

It may be that the increased contextualisation of literacy teaching in relation to the local sponsors of literacy might have an effect on the numbers of people deciding to continue their literacy learning above the first level. As I have already indicated, the majority of literacy learning is at the lowest levels of the available instructional programmes. From the point of view of several of the programme organisers whom I interviewed, learner dropout is a problem which they have not been able to overcome. However, from the point of view of literacy as a social practice, this is not so much a problem as the reality of the situation indicating that the demand for literacy learning is at the lower rather than the higher levels. My research did not focus on the reasons for learners not continuing to attend classes but many reasons are possible, including the one mentioned by Tchidémé Augustin that people simply move away (see page 159). It may be that some people lose interest in continuing their learning and decide that the effort and commitment required for learning are too great relative to the value of doing so or, conversely, that they find that what they have learned is sufficient for their purposes and that they have met their goals. This should be regarded by literacy programmes as a satisfactory outcome for the learners. However, if some people drop out because of feeling discouraged, this is a prob-

lem which needs to be addressed. It may be that a more direct link between the process of learning and the application of what is learned would encourage them to continue.

The literacy programmes in the area could also do more to recognise that there is a continuum of ability in literacy among Mofu people and that people such as Rosaline and Magerdawa possess some degree of skill even if they regard themselves as non-literate (see Chapter 6). Similarly, people who are literate are not necessarily totally independent users of literacy and may need help with particular tasks, for instance reading or writing in one of the languages with which they are not familiar. In view of this, literacy programme organisers might explore what support they could give to people who did not need to acquire the basic skills of literacy but who nevertheless were still in need of some help with literacy. In addition to the formal classes which they provide, literacy programmes could take the initiative in offering support on demand for those who requested it, perhaps in the form of a literacy stall which people could come to when they were having difficulty in understanding a written document or when they needed help with writing of some form. Such an approach has been suggested by Kell (1996) and has been tried with some success in Nigeria (Aderinoye and Rogers 2005). A similar experiment could easily be tried in the larger markets in the Mofu area, in the churches or associated with the cotton GICs. Wherever they were located, such stalls could also be centres of literature of various kinds and the location of group literacy activities, as well as the source of support to individual people. If financial resources were available, such an experiment could be tried and might have a very productive outcome.

A further implication of my research for literacy programmes relates to the multilingual nature of the Mofu area. At the present time, only the CDD literacy programme offers literacy instruction in more than one language, and even in this programme the literacy classes focus on literacy either in Mofu or in French. This in spite of the fact that literacy in more than one language has a value in this type of context which is recognised by the local people, some of whom desire to be competent with speaking and reading and writing in more than one language. As Yates (1995) rightly argues, people need a “repertoire of literacy skills” and those who speak a local language should not be denied access to languages of wider communication and power.

This does not necessarily imply that adults who do not possess basic literacy skills should be taught to read and write in their own language and in another language simultaneously, especially if they are not fluent in the second language. While learning to read and write for the first time through an unfamiliar language may not be impossible, it is far from easy (Gerbault 1997). This is understandable if adults are faced with learning two new skills at the same time – learning to speak a language and learning to read and write.

As a principle of instructional methodology, therefore, it would not be advisable for classes to attempt to teach literacy to learners in more than one language simultaneously unless they were already fluent in speaking the languages of instruction, but programme organisers might well consider if there is a place for offering instruction in more than one language sequentially, perhaps for people who have learned to read and write in Mofu who wish to learn literacy in Fulfulde or French, or *vice versa*. For instance, it may be

that some members of the churches who had been motivated to learn literacy in Mofu in order to read the New Testament in their language might express an interest in learning literacy in Fulfulde or French in order to read the Old Testament, or for other purposes associated with these languages. Alternatively, instruction might be provided for people who were literate in French who wished to learn literacy in Mofu. This would raise significant issues in relation to organisation, teacher training and also teaching materials, since it would be advisable to develop materials designed for the transfer of one language to another, but these could be overcome if there were an identified demand.

At the least, and without requiring any additional resources, learners might be encouraged to progress from literacy learning in one language to literacy learning in another through moving from classes in one programme to classes in another. Contact between the organisers of the various programmes, as occurs to a limited extent already, might facilitate this process. Such contact might also lead to the promotion of adult literacy in a concerted manner through a joint celebration, perhaps at an annual event towards the end of the literacy season; this might further encourage more people to take advantage of the learning opportunities which are currently available.

Lastly, there is a clear implication for all of the Mofu literacy programmes in relation to the teaching of writing. As I have indicated in Chapter 7, many of my interviewees made a connection between literacy and writing letters to their relatives or to others. This particular literacy practice appears to be largely ignored in any explicit way by the literacy programmes in the Mofu area. The social practice view of literacy would argue that this is a deficiency which needs to be addressed if the prevalence of this literacy practice is to be acknowledged and the aims of many learners are to be met.

I would argue that the implications of the social practice view of literacy which I have drawn out offer useful pointers as to how the literacy programmes in the Mofu area could achieve greater impact and effectiveness. This is not to ignore the challenges of the situation in which they work but it is to address the three fundamental questions which concern all literacy programmes: firstly, how to attract people into the programmes, secondly, how to retain them during the intended course of learning and, thirdly, how to equip them to meet their goals of learning. They have to do this while operating with few material and financial resources; this is a problem which, variously according to the programme, affects the number of classes which they can accept, the amount of training which they can give to teachers, and the degree of supervision which they can provide once classes have begun. The amount of time available for literacy teaching and learning is also heavily circumscribed by the demands of the seasonal cycle of agricultural work. At the present time, only four months of the year are available for literacy teaching and, in view of limitations of the literate environment, learners run a serious risk of having forgotten what they have learned in one year by the time that they return to the literacy classes in the following year. By offering more flexible approaches and integrating literacy learning into existing ongoing activities, this problem could be successfully addressed.



#### **9.d Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have drawn out the implications of my research for the literacy programmes in the Mofu area, taking into account the realities and constraints of the context in which they are operating. I have shown how in various ways, my research offers several avenues through which these programmes could become more effective in involving learners, retaining them during a course of learning, and equipping them to meet their goals for learning.

It would assist these literacy programmes considerably if greater resources were available, but success in literacy work, however it is defined, is more than a matter of budgets. A greater awareness of the contours of literacy practice in the local community might enable these programmes to equip people better to make use of literacy as they desire to do.



## 10. Conclusions

In this final chapter, I will briefly review the findings of my research, locating them in relation to the questions which I sought to address. I will also discuss how my research contributes to the field of literacy studies. I will then step back to address a number of issues which arise from my research, including how my research methodology could have been improved and what further avenues for research need to be pursued following my study.

### *10.a Summary of Findings*

In this thesis, I have examined the views of literacy of a number of members of a rural community in northern Cameroon. My intention has been not simply to identify their views but, more importantly, to seek to understand how these have been formed, particularly through the influence of the context in which my informants live.

I will discuss my findings in relation to the three primary questions which interested me, which I set out in Chapter 1 (see page 6). Firstly, I aimed to establish what understandings of literacy were held by local people, including what instrumental or other purposes they believed it served for them and what symbolic importance it held for them. Secondly, I wanted to find out how these understandings were linked with their particular social and socio-economic context and how they were formed by it. Lastly, I was interested in exploring how far the locally available literacy provision took these understandings into account.

I will now summarise my responses to these questions as formed by my research. These responses need to be understood in relation to the Mofu context which I presented in Chapter 9a.

#### **What understandings of literacy were held by local people?**

Although it is possible to offer some cautious generalisation about the views of literacy of Mofu people, at least as far as I was able to discern in my research, I found that there were also very significant variations within the community.

For the most part, my informants subscribed to a common view which regarded literacy as an established feature of life, offering some advantages to people who could read and write. They thought about literacy as it affected them personally rather than in relation to the community as a whole. Although they might have acknowledged this wider dimension of literacy, they were most forthcoming about what literacy could do for them as individuals, and what they as individuals could do with literacy. How literacy might lead to a change in life at the level of the community was of less interest to them than to the organisers of literacy programmes whom I interviewed.

Almost all my informants shared a similar view of the economic value of literacy. They believed that literacy was essential for people who wanted to better themselves materially by obtaining paid employment. In this sense, economics exerted a strong influence over how they viewed literacy. In Brandt's terms, it acts as a "sponsor" of literacy for them (Brandt 1998). However, this sponsorship did not operate in an entirely consistent direc-

tion. At one level, it promoted a positive view of literacy but, at another level, contemporary economic conditions and the lack of local employment opportunities led people who were not literate to conclude that there was little to be gained by investing their time in literacy learning. Literacy might help with employment in principle but there was little evidence of this in practice. Nevertheless, parents were sufficiently committed to the value of literacy and education to make some effort to send their children to school.

My informants also thought of literacy as useful for letter writing and when travelling to other places. They did not identify other purposes as important, such as personal administration, financial record keeping, or creativity and entertainment.

Some of my informants also identified an intangible outcome of literacy, namely personal autonomy. This was the aspiration of some who described themselves as non-literate and the much-valued possession of others who were literate, especially those who had recently learned to read and write.

For the people in my study, literacy was linked with language. They evaluated literacy in terms of its association with the various languages in use in the area. Being able to read and write in French seemed to be particularly useful to them since this form of literacy was needed for employment and for engaging with texts emanating from outside the immediate Mofu area. Literacy in Fulfulde was regarded as valuable for reading the Bible, and literacy in Mofu for reading the Biblical texts published in this language in recent years.

My informants thought about literacy in relation to personal advantage and disadvantage. Literate people regarded themselves as advantaged; correspondingly, non-literate people tended to regard themselves as disadvantaged. Nevertheless, non-literate people rejected the notion, which they felt some literate people expressed, that they were in some way ignorant or incapable.

Some understandings of literacy were not held generally across the community. Christians were more positive towards literacy than non-Christians were, and, among Christians, members of the Baptist church were more strongly of the opinion that literacy was valuable for Bible reading and personal discipleship than were members of the Catholic church. Those who followed the traditional religion were not attracted to literacy as they regarded it as an attribute of Christianity. In broad terms, religion exerted a strong influence as a sponsor forming how people thought of literacy. The particular shape of this sponsorship varied by denomination.

It is therefore valid to conclude that certain generalisations hold true for the community as a whole, and that others are specific to particular groups within the community. At the same time, it is important to remember that each of the people I met in Mowo was an individual in their own right and that they did not necessarily fit into a pattern which might be ascribed to them as a member of a larger group. Thus, one of the women in the French literacy class held on the premises of the Baptist church was a Muslim, in spite of what may be generally true of Muslims and their attitude towards the church, and Djidja Bakary, a traditionalist (see page 117), had made a start at learning to read Mofu, contrary

to the general view of traditionalists towards literacy in that language. In the midst of valid statements about particular groups of people in general, and the influence of context upon them, it also has to be recognised that people think and act as individuals and that their attitudes and actions may not fit into expected patterns.

### **How were my informants' understandings of literacy linked with their particular social and socio-economic context?**

My interactions with many informants and my observation of life in Mowo and its immediate region led me to conclude that the views of literacy which people held were situated in their local setting (Barton *et al.* 2000). This setting was formed as the result of past and present influences, some from sources far removed from the village. How people understood literacy was affected in part by the overall context in which they lived, which set the conditions of life for the population as a whole, and by their individual circumstances and their personal experience of the influences acting within their context. The social and economic circumstances of their lives exerted a major influence over the ways in which they understood literacy, and their views were understandable in relation to this.

My interviews with Rosaline, Magerdawa and Gabriel (see Chapter 6), supported by my interviews with my other informants and my observations, clearly demonstrated their primary preoccupations and concerns. For all three of them, their main focus was to meet the needs of their families and to provide their basic necessities in one way or another. They did this through the means at their disposal, farming the land and raising some livestock to provide food and, ideally, some income, and supplementing this with petty trading or by providing labour for other people. They made it clear that meeting their basic needs was a constant challenge as they faced problems of the climate and the unfavourable environment, exacerbated by the increasing pressure of the population on the land. They all saw themselves as poor and as lacking the material resources necessary not just to advance but even to maintain their present position relative to others. They seemed to live in a cycle of poverty, from which it was very hard to escape. There were few opportunities for employment in the village and the jobs which paid best were open only to people who had had a number of years of education and training. For many young people in the village, the hope of a better future lay in leaving the area and going to the cities to find unskilled work of some kind.

Being able to read and write independently was not an immediate priority for my informants because it did not meet the most urgent demands of their lives. Like the people from across the north of Cameroon who were interviewed in a recent household survey and who identified their greatest needs as more water sources, more grain stores and better market facilities (Government of Cameroon 2002), literacy and education are not the highest priorities for them. People who are non-literate do not have to learn to read and write because they are able to obtain help with literacy tasks from their relatives or friends.

If there is validity in the concept of a hierarchy of basic needs proposed by Maslow (1987), it is likely that my informants would identify being able to read and write as a considerably lower priority than the more pressing need for food and shelter. Literacy is more a matter of esteem or "self-actualisation" in Maslow's terminology. It may enable

people to achieve their potential and to meet the demands of their lives more comfortably and easily, but it does not necessarily help with basic survival. For many in Mowo, the only literacy which counted was the literacy which was evidence of education, and which could lead to employment and a better standard of living. This kind of literacy was not available to them as adults in the village and prospects of employment were, in any case, extremely limited, even for people with schooling. The overall view of my informants, especially those who were non-literate, was that they could meet their immediate needs without being literate, and that literacy was not a vital necessity for them.

Yet, within this overall picture, the individual dimension was also significant. How people viewed literacy was to a certain extent affected by their personal circumstances and their interaction with particular sponsors of literacy in the community. The churches were very influential in relation to Christians, and the school brought parents as well as children into contact with a world of literacy. This effect did not however extend to farming, even though virtually everyone in the community was engaged in this activity. For the most part, my informants were not convinced that literacy had a particular use in enhancing their agricultural competence.

In general, therefore, the local literacy programmes appeared to be operating in an environment in which there were many people who do not place great importance on literacy but also some who valued literacy and had particular purposes in engaging with it.

### **How far does the locally available literacy provision take these understandings into account?**

All the literacy programmes in the Mofu area were clearly attempting to meet the literacy needs of the local population as they understood them but, as I have argued in Chapter 9, I believe that there are various ways in which they could do more to respond effectively to the needs and desires of those who come to them to learn to read and write or to increase their level of literacy competency.

The Sodecoton programme is a good example of a programme created for a particular group of people, namely cotton growers, in which the instructional content is closely related to their identified needs within this industry. The CALMO programme also has a clearly defined profile of learners in that they were all members of the local churches, but it was less successful in responding to their expressed motivation. As I have suggested (see page 164), this programme could make a much stronger link with the desire of its learners to read the Bible if it included Biblical material within the literacy lessons and offered literacy learning in the context of existing Bible study groups. The literacy programmes which focused on literacy in French appeared to be responding to the needs of their learners, although, as with the other programmes, there might be ways in which their teaching effectiveness could be improved.

Nevertheless, my research suggests that it would be false to expect that modifications to the content and presentation of the literacy programmes would be sufficient to produce a radical increase in the take-up of literacy learning opportunities by local people or a revolution in the extent of literacy use in the area. As I showed in Chapters 6 to 8, many

people in my study had firm views about the limited value of literacy for them, so it would be unwise for programme organisers to have excessive expectations about the impact of their programmes. They do not have complete control over whether or not people participate in learning and there is much that is beyond their influence.

Even if the local literacy programmes modify their activities along the lines I have suggested, it remains true that literacy on its own, however well the programmes are organised and however well people learn, is not likely to make a radical change to the overall context in which people live. Literacy cannot improve the quality of the soil, or increase the price which farmers receive for their cotton. The Mofu community may well remain poor even if many people learn to read and write.

Such an outlook might be discouraging to some literacy programme organisers but I see no reason for this. There is no doubt as to the value of their programmes in terms of the difference which they can make to individual people in particular areas of their lives. Many of my informants regarded literacy as very desirable and the literacy learners whom I interviewed (Ayomomey Pauline, page 132, and Kounei Rafkatou, page 139) indicated that learning was important to them and gave them a sense of achievement. The challenge for literacy programme leaders is to identify those people who see literacy as giving them some benefit and to work with them to help them achieve their goals. Along with others who work with the social practice view of literacy (for instance, Barton and Hamilton 1998, Barton *et al.* 2007, Papen 2005c, 2007, Street 2005), I consider that literacy programmes which equip people to accomplish the literacy tasks which are important to them fulfil a very valuable role within adult education provision, irrespective of their impact on the community as a whole.

At the same time, literacy programme organisers might also consider what other strategies they could adopt to help address the needs of the community on a wider scale. As demonstrated from other parts of the world (DFID 2000, Oxenham *et al.* 2002, Rogers *et al.* 1999), there are various ways in which literacy teaching can be offered alongside other activities aimed at individual or community development. For instance, groups of literacy learners can work together on income generating activities or literacy teaching can be included in work-related training courses. There are many possibilities, although they all depend on the vision, expertise and resources of programme leaders, and the interest of local people. For the particular programmes in the Mofu area, I consider that the most easily implemented strategy would be to work in collaboration with activities which already exist or are being considered for the future. I have already suggested that this could take place through a closer integration of the CALMO programme with the Bible study activities of the churches, and this and other literacy programmes could work more closely with the cotton GIC. The local programmes could explore other possibilities for partnership with other local organisations and NGOs, according to the expressed needs of the community and the resources at their disposal. The possibilities are numerous but it is only those who are conversant with the local context who can decide on the most appropriate ways forward. A thorough knowledge of the community along the lines I have outlined in this research is essential to any further development efforts.

## ***10.b Contribution to Theory and Practice***

In answering the above research questions, I was driven by theoretical and practical motivations to explore the understandings of literacy of a particular group of people and to draw out the implications of these understandings for the literacy programmes in the area. My approach was innovative in two ways. Firstly, most of my informants were not people who were already engaged in literacy learning, unlike in other studies (see page 5), but rather a wide range of ordinary members of the community, many of whom described themselves as non-literate. Through my research, I gained a clear impression of both the wider environment in which these programmes were operating and the views of literacy of the people whom they were attempting to engage in learning. My attention was on ways in which the programmes might respond to those who were not already involved in learning, not on how they might help those who had already joined literacy classes.

Secondly, taking up the challenge of Papen (2005a), I paid particular attention to what I have described as the invisible aspect of literacy practices (see page 19), namely the views and understandings of literacy of my informants, rather than to the more obvious uses and functions of literacy within the community. Although I believe that it is necessary for literacy programmes to be aware of how people use literacy, as this has important implications for their content and methodology, I argue that there is also great value in programmes endeavouring to understand the local meanings of literacy. These meanings are important because they influence the expectations and motivations of people as they consider engaging in literacy learning. Previous studies have not focused on conceptions of literacy as explicitly as I have done.

Through this research, I have therefore demonstrated in new ways the value of the social practice view of literacy for exploring literacy in its local context and for revealing information which is important for the planning and implementation of adult literacy provision.

I have also shown how adult educators undertaking needs assessments can benefit from entering deeply into the perspective of their learners and potential learners. In the process, I have offered a model for how such research can be conducted. I have shown the necessity of adopting ethnographic methodologies, as other researchers have done (Maddox 2007, Papen 2007, Robinson-Pant 2001a, Street *et al.* 2006), engaging directly with local people and interviewing a substantial number of informants. A full understanding of local conceptions demands such a methodology since it is only in interviews that people have the opportunity to express their views directly; simply observing literacy practices does not achieve this purpose. In addition, numerous interviews are necessary, since only in this way do patterns and complexities in local understandings begin to emerge.

Furthermore, I have offered an account of how local conceptions of literacy are influenced by their context and how they make sense in terms of the particular features of this context. I have demonstrated that the local context has to be understood in very broad terms since, as is the case with Mowo, people are affected not only by whatever takes place in their immediate environment, but also by policies and decisions emanating from much further away, whether within Cameroon from the national government, or even further afield from international agencies and development organisations. I have shown how



Mowo is part of a wider world, not only in political and economic terms but also, through the local churches, in religious terms. In this way, local expressions and understandings of literacy are connected to global forces and influences. What constitutes “local” has to be interpreted in increasingly broad terms for, over the last century, the wider world impacting life in the village has grown in its extent and influence, and it is likely to continue to do so.

In this sense, I have attempted to tackle an issue similar to that addressed by Brandt and Clinton (2002) and Collins and Blot (2003) (see Chapter 2, Section e) who have criticised the New Literacy Studies for an excessive interest in the local and who have sought to explore the connections between the local and global aspects of literacy. Like them, I have found it insufficient to focus exclusively on local aspects and I have attempted to make a link between these and the wider setting in which they occurred. My research, however, has led me to characterise this relationship in different terms.

As I discussed in Chapter 2e, Brandt and Clinton explore the nature of literacy which they regard as a “transcontextualising social agent” on the grounds that the use of literacy in one place can affect its use in another place. Such an observation is of interest but I would prefer to identify the external influence on local conceptions not as literacy as such but as a range of decisions, policies and practices originating in social, economic, political, cultural and religious sources near and far.

I would align myself somewhat more with the position adopted by Collins and Blot, who like Brandt and Clinton, have sought to move the focus on literacy away from local practices alone. As I discussed in Chapter 2e, they make a link between the local and global through the power which literacy possesses in any context. It would appear that those of my informants who associated literacy with advantage and lack of literacy with disadvantage would agree with their view. However, my research was directed primarily at connecting local understandings of literacy with their wider context and, while I accept that power is related to this, I did not make this the focus of my discussion. I may therefore stand guilty of the charge which they lay against ethnographic approaches that they fall short in what is to them a fundamentally important area (2003: 65).

While not pursuing precisely the same interests as these commentators, I have in common with them my conviction that the local context has to be understood in its relation to its wider, or global, context. All the various aspects of the context have to be taken into account in exploring local understandings of literacy. If organisers of adult literacy programmes are to be well equipped in their efforts to help people acquire greater literacy competencies, a full understanding of the context in which local people live their lives, and how this context is evolving and impacting local meanings of literacy in changing ways, is essential.

### ***10.c Methodological Reflections***

My research demonstrated the value of ethnographic methodologies for research into social phenomena, as I believe that it enabled me to come close to the lives of people in Mowo and to understand the meaning of literacy from their point of view. With this approach, I found that it was possible for new insights to develop as my research progressed

and for my understanding to deepen steadily. However, there is no doubt that my research could have been strengthened.

Above all, it is clear that I would have been able to enter more deeply into the local community if I had been able to speak Mofu-Gudur. Not only would this have enabled me to interact directly with my informants in my interviews with them but, even more importantly, it would have made it possible for me to take part in informal conversation and to listen in to what people around me were saying. What I was told in the interviews was illuminating, and conducting interviews was an essential part of my research methodology since this was the only way open to me of eliciting a large quantity of information and opinion on the topic which interested me, but an interview is an artificially created situation. Informal conversation and incidental comments are important sources of data which were unfortunately closed to me.

It would have been better if I had been able to conduct my interviews without needing an interpreter, as I believe that this would have given me greater access into people's lives and thinking but this was simply not possible within the limitations of the time available to me. Nevertheless, I learned a considerable amount and have been able to provide a response to the questions which I sought to answer.

#### ***10.d A Developing Research Agenda***

In the light of my comments in the previous section, it is my sincere hope that the literacy professionals in the Mofu area, especially those who are Mofu or Mofu-speaking, will consider the findings of my research and how they might apply them to their programmes. I do not, however, expect them to endorse them uncritically. Indeed, my desire would be for them to carry out further research in their area along the lines which I have followed in order to explore the strength of my findings and to add greater detail to them. If Mofu people were to conduct research of this kind, it would not only overcome the barrier of language with which I was faced but it would also obviate the risk of my informants telling me what they imagined would be appropriate to tell me as a white person. It is important that development agendas should be set by those who are most closely implicated in the problems and the possible solutions rather than being dictated by outside "experts" who lack an intimate knowledge of the local situations. Further research by Mofu people would meet this requirement.

My research may also be of interest to other practitioners elsewhere who are interested in developing a greater understanding of local understandings of literacy. I do not anticipate that they would uncover a similar profile of views since each context has its own particular features. In the Mofu area, for instance, basic survival is of paramount concern, and literacy is seen as of limited value for meeting the most pressing needs of life. In other places, where people do not face so many challenges for growing food and meeting their financial needs, literacy might possibly be regarded in different terms, perhaps as serving a wider range of purposes, including creativity and leisure. Nevertheless, the approach which I followed in this location could be applied equally well in other places.

My research has explored only one aspect of literacy as it relates to adult literacy programmes but many further avenues of enquiry remain. For instance, it would be informative, in the Mofu area or elsewhere, to explore more closely than I have done how the various local literacy programmes understand literacy and how their understandings match with those of the learners who come to them. Some examples of this type of research have been published recently but there is room for a more detailed approach (Betts 2003, Malan 1996a, Millican 2004, Papen 2001, Puchner 2003). This would involve studying the materials and methodologies of these programmes to identify what understandings of literacy they contain and examining the meaning of literacy for the programme leaders and the literacy teachers, whose views may or may not coincide. Such research would identify the extent to which the understandings of the programmes are accepted by local organisers and teachers implementing them, and whether any discrepancy affects the learning of the adults taking part. It would also be instructive to explore how far the particular understandings of the programmes influences the understandings of literacy of the learners (Bartlett in press). The answers to such questions could offer further useful insights for effective adult literacy education.

In view of my argument regarding the situated nature of understandings of literacy, it would also be informative to conduct similar research among the many Mofu people who are outside the home area. Many of them live in the cities of Cameroon, in a context which is significantly different from that of the north of the country. Urban literacy can present a character of its own, as others have noted (Rogers 2005a). Do Mofu people in Yaoundé, for example, understand literacy in a similar way to Mofu people in Mowo, or do the conditions of their lives introduce some differences? What is the significance of literacy in Mofu for them, especially in relation to French? Does religion feature as highly for them as a contextual influence on their thinking? Such research would be particularly informative when placed alongside my research in Mowo.

### ***10.e Future prospects***

My research provided a snapshot of the views of literacy of people in Mowo at one particular time. If a similar snapshot had been taken ten or twenty years ago, it would have contained details different from those of today, just as the snapshot of today will differ from one taken ten or twenty years in the future. Life in Mowo has changed considerably in recent decades and this process shows no sign of slowing. In the midst of these changes, the meaning of literacy itself is also undergoing change. Whereas at one time, basic literacy skills learned in adulthood would have been sufficient to obtain paid employment, this is no longer the case now that formal education has become established in the village with more children attending school and completing their education with some measure of competence in literacy and in French. As the number of literate and educated adults has increased, those who have no qualification other than basic literacy skills have found that what they are able to do with basic literacy alone has become devalued.

It is not only the value of literacy which is changing. The meaning of literacy is also changing, especially as literacy in Mofu is becoming more widespread in the community. It is only since the development of the written form of the language, and the promotion of its use by CALMO, that literacy in Mofu has become possible. At the present time, its use

is largely confined to the religious sphere, but it is possible that in time it will be used more commonly in other domains.

Literacy in the Mofu-Gudur area, as elsewhere, is in flux (Brandt 2001). In Mowo, more children are learning the basics of literacy at school, and are acquiring some degree of knowledge of French. Literacy in French may be seen as competing with literacy in Mofu, and also with literacy in Fulfulde. Each has its primary function in a particular domain of life but, as these domains rise and fall in relative importance, and as the use of these languages in the community changes over time, the use of literacy in these languages will also change. Yet it is not necessary to see these three languages in outright competition. In a multilingual area, such as Mofu-Gudur, individual people make use of the languages available to them to meet whatever communicative needs they have. The three languages and literacies exist alongside each other without apparent conflict or tension. In the future, complementarity may be as much a feature of the written use of these languages as it is at present in their spoken use. What matters, if the Mofu people are to be fully engaged in their own community, in the wider region and the world beyond, is for them to be able to make full use of the various languages spoken in the area, and to do so in their written form as much as in their spoken form. A multilingual environment can also be a multi-literate environment.

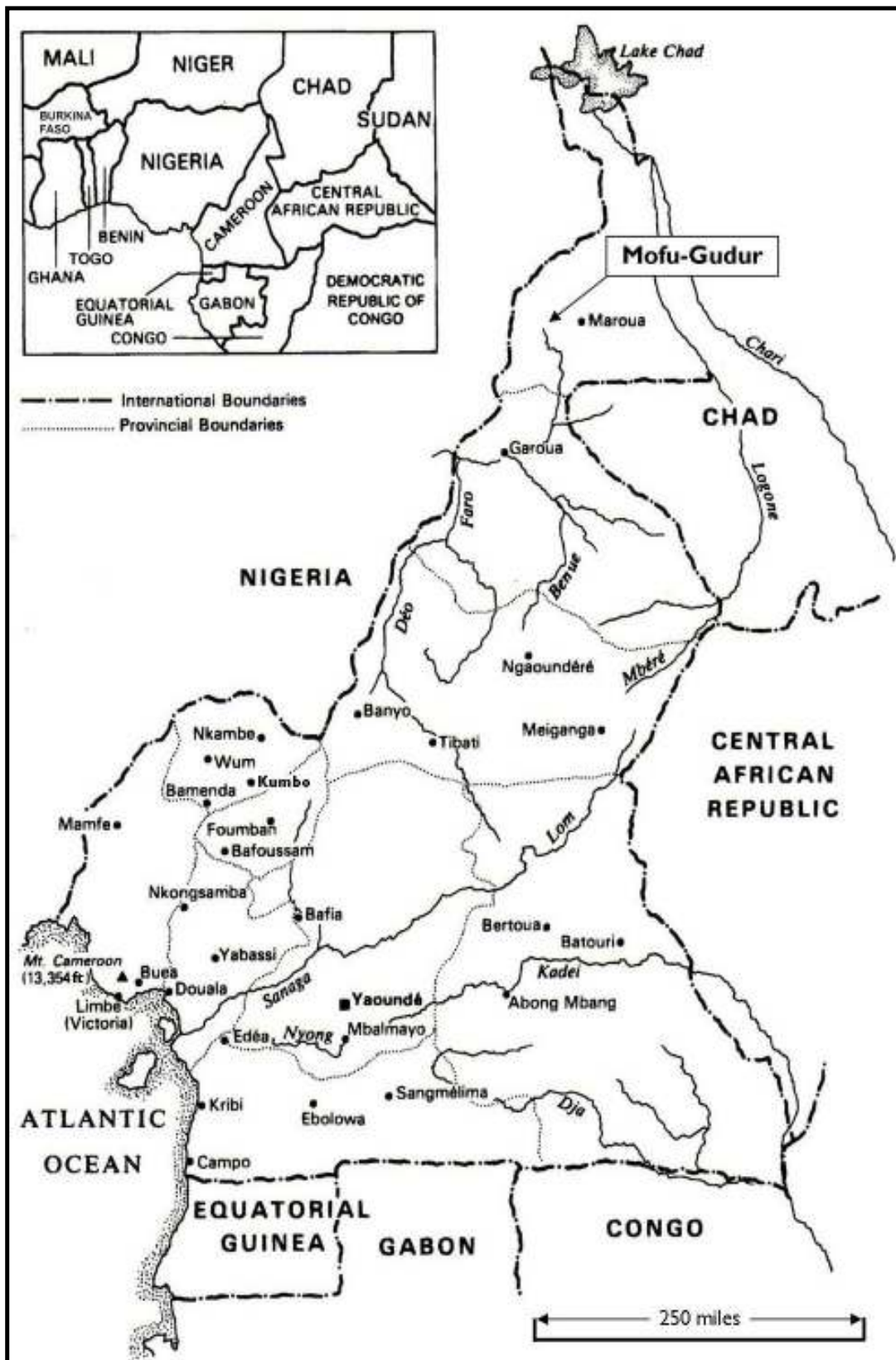
### ***10.f Closing comments***

Lastly, I would like to comment that it has been a considerable privilege for me to have the opportunity to conduct this research and that I am very grateful to the many people in Cameroon and in the UK who made it possible, some of whom I have mentioned by name in the Acknowledgements.

I have learned a great deal about literacy in general, about the particular situation of people in one small part of northern Cameroon and about how the meanings of literacy in one context are embedded in the contours of that setting. I discovered more than I expected, especially how different groups in the community had distinctive ways of thinking about literacy. I believe that this degree of detail has vindicated my research approach. Above all, I now feel that I understand the contribution which the social practice view of literacy can make to adult literacy programmes.

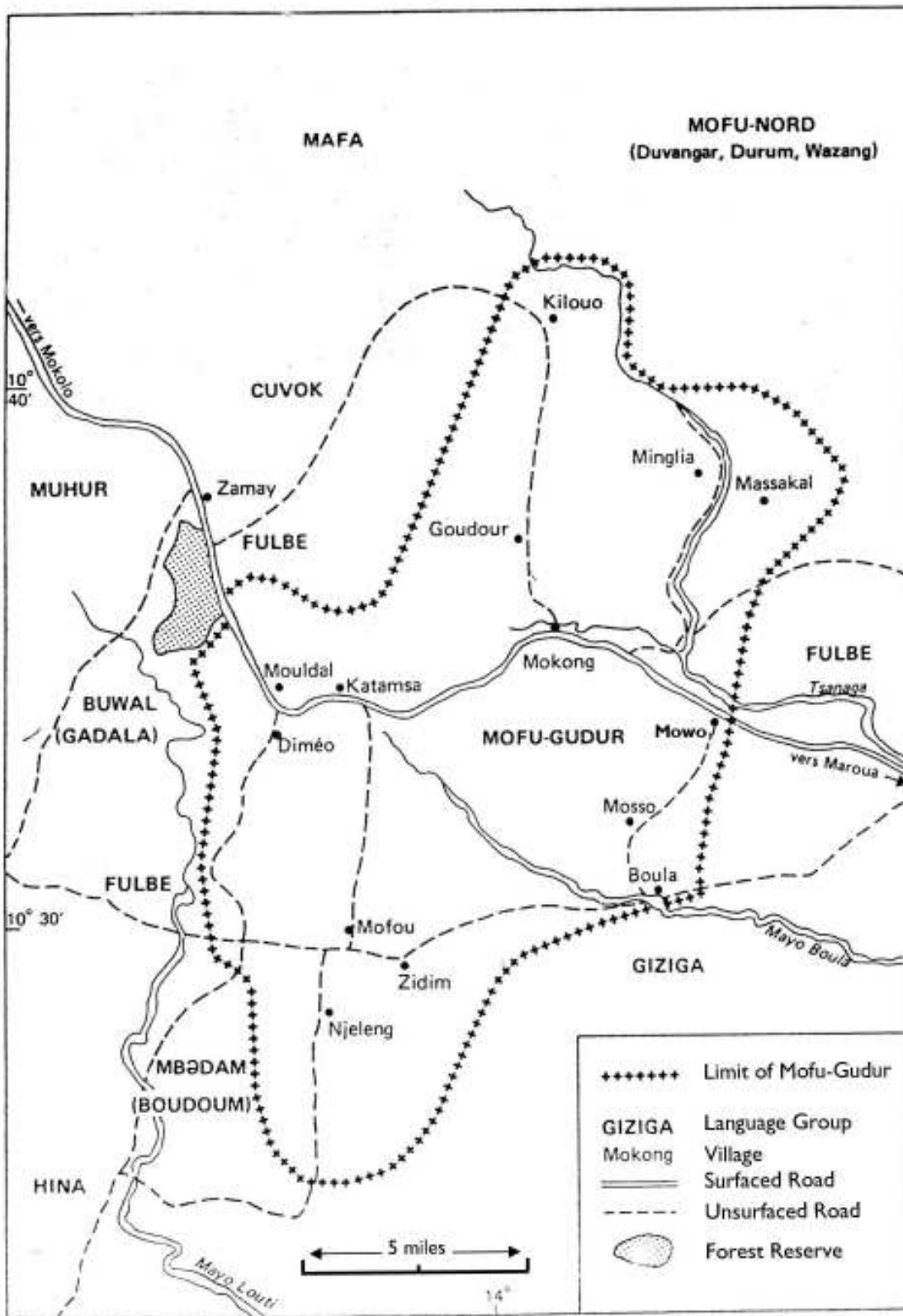
## *Maps*






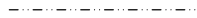

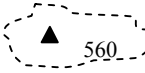
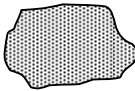




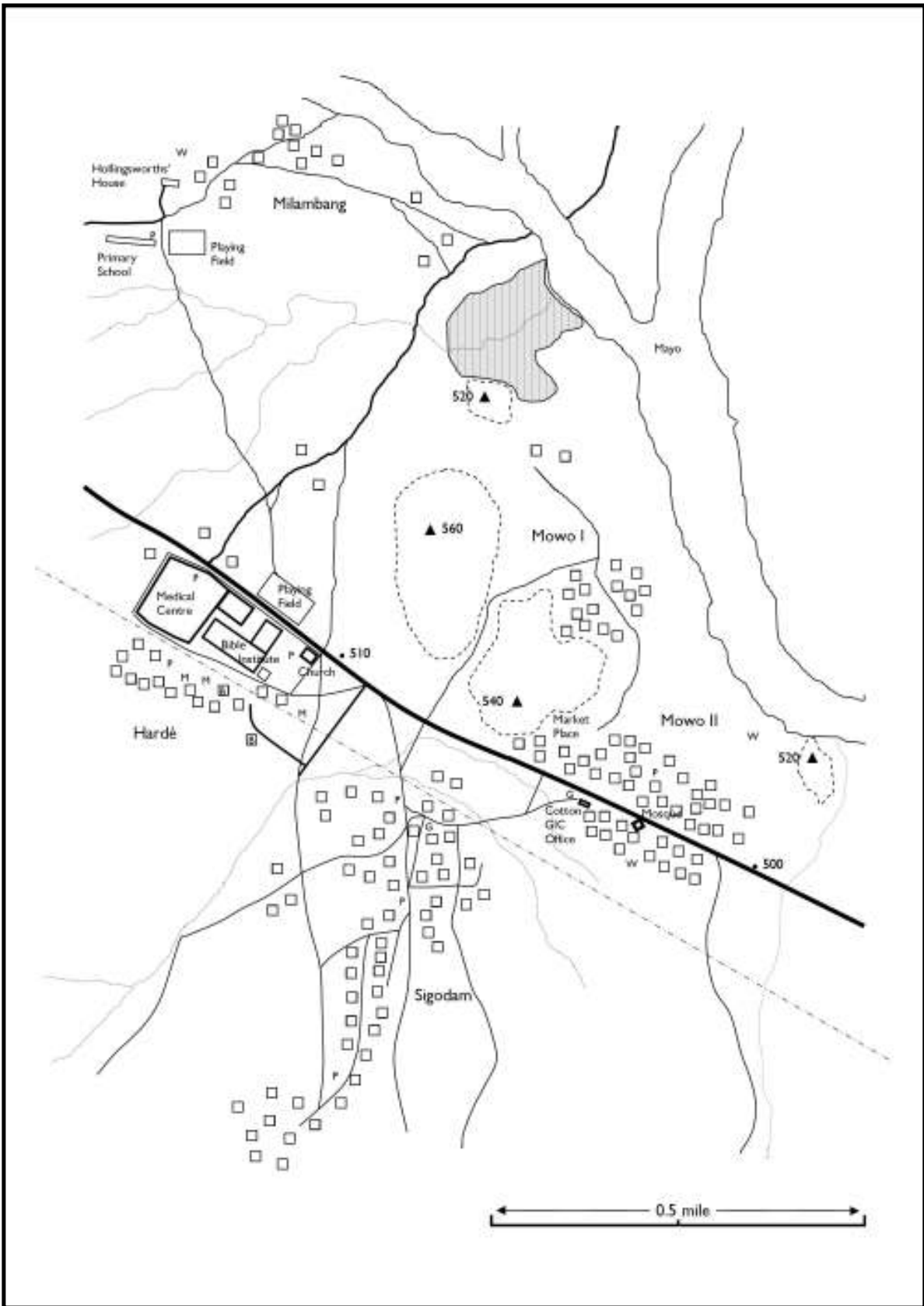






**Map 2: Mofu-Gudur**  
 (adapted from Barreteau 1988)

<b>Map of Mowo Key to Symbols</b>	
	Surfaced road
	Unsurfaced road
	Major path
	Electricity line
	Water course (seasonal)
	Base of mountain      Summit with height in metres
	Sacred Woodland
 	Compound      Other building
. 510	Spot height
W    P	Well      Water Pump
G   M   B	Grain Store      Mill      Bar



Map 3: Mowo



## *Appendices*



### *Appendix 1: Interviewees*

In addition to a considerable amount of informal contact with many people in Mowo and the surrounding area, I conducted formal interviews with the following people during my field research.

#### **A. Residents of Mowo**

The people in this group were interviewed without prior arrangement after meeting them in the village. The ages given are approximate, being my own estimations or those of the interviewees. I have indicated whether each interviewee described themselves as literate or non-literate.

<u>Name</u>	<u>Sex</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Self-Description</u>	<u>Religion</u>	<u>Date Inter-viewed</u>
Abdou Madsal	m	26	literate	Baptist	15th March 2006
Adamou Yaya	m	45	literate	Baptist	13th March 2006
Alkam Moïse	m	46	literate	Baptist	7th March 2006
Amcey-Palah Rosaline	f	30	non-literate	Catholic	15th March 2006
Arabey Wandala	m	50	literate	Baptist	7th March 2006
Asta Bouba	f	50	non-literate	Muslim	17th April 2006
Bouba Ngahuyak	m	60	non-literate	traditional	13th March 2006
Daïrou Altetanko Sou-dou	m	30	literate	Baptist	21st March 2006
Daouna	f	30	non-literate	Catholic	21st March 2006
Djidja Bakari	f	40	non-literate	traditional	13th March 2006
Gabriel Belpas	m	28	literate	Baptist	3rd March 2006
Haman Jean-Paul	m	21	literate	Catholic	15th March 2006

Kadiwa Tafida	m	70	non-literate	traditional	7th March 2006
Magerdawa Bimarkwa	m	38	non-literate	Baptist	7th March 2006
Mbedfawa Kifadaw	f	50	non-literate	traditional	9th March 2006
Mezla Centa	m	70	non-literate	Baptist	9th March 2006
Moussa Baydam	m	50	non-literate	Baptist	21st March 2006
Moussa Kawni	m	45	non-literate	Baptist	3rd March 2006
Ndadaw Tagaday	f	46	non-literate	traditional	3rd March 2006
Salamatou	f	28	non-literate	Catholic	15th March 2006
Saslam Kawni	m	65	non-literate	traditional	9th March 2006
Wadi Mbedetemey	m	40	non-literate	Baptist	21st March 2006

The following people were interviewed by arrangement as I regarded them as significant in the community.

<u>Name</u>	<u>Role</u>	<u>Date Interviewed</u>
Abdoulaye Wandala	Village chief	13th April 2006
Djaouro Godgalam	<i>Quartier</i> chief	28th February 2006
Djaouro Koutkobei Ridjo	<i>Quartier</i> chief	28th February 2006
Emmanuel Mbiene	Director, Bible Institute	27th March 2006
Galla Goloved	President of cotton GIC	26th June 2007
Hamidou Antoine	Treasurer, Mutual Health Savings Society	26th June 2007
Hamidou Maloum	Leader of Muslim community	17th April 2007
Jacques Apala	Baptist church elder	7th April 2007



Jean Aba	Baptist church elder	7th April 2007
Koura Abakatakwa	Oldest man in Mowo, said to be 120 years old	11th April 2006
Oumarou	Chief nurse, Medical Centre	27th June 2007
Yaya André	Deputy President of cotton GIC, cook for Hollingsworths	26th January 2006
Yougouda Christophe	Technical Supervisor of cotton GIC	16th February 2006
Yutta Mbiene	Administrator, Medical Centre	27th June 2007

## **B. People Involved in Literacy Programmes**

### **B.i Literacy Learners**

The people in this group were attending literacy classes in the area. I have indicated the location of the class and the language in which literacy was being taught.

<u>Name</u>	<u>Sex</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Literacy Class</u>	<u>Lan- guage</u>	<u>Relig- ion</u>	<u>Date Inter- viewed</u>
Angeline	f	25	Zidim Baptist Church	Mofu	Baptist	27th February 2006
Ayowomey Pauline	f	19	CROPSEC, Mowo	French	Baptist	10th April 2006
Celine Goudine	f	33	Mowo Baptist Church	French	Baptist	27th March 2006
Djidja Léa	f	45	CROPSEC, Mowo	French	Baptist	10th April 2006
Dorkas	f	18	Zidim Baptist Church	Mofu	Baptist	27th February 2006
Kayang Prisca	f	32	Zidim Baptist Church	Mofu	Baptist	6th March 2006
Kossen Clémentine	f	38	Mowo Baptist Church	French	Baptist	17th April 2006
Kounai Rafkatou	f	32	Zidim Baptist Church	Mofu	Baptist	6th March 2006
Lamarla Markus	m	28	Gouloua Evangelical	Mofu	Evan- gelical	2nd March 2006

Church						
Maïmouna Catherine	f	17	Gouloua Evangelical Church	Mofu	Evan-gelical	9th March 2006
Mamma Moussa	f	30	Mowo Baptist Church	French	Muslim	27th March 2006
Mamma Rosaline	f	22	Gouloua Evangelical Church	Mofu	Evan-gelical	9th March 2006
Medi Soratou	f	20	Mowo Baptist Church	French	Baptist	17th April 2006
Ndjidda Laurent	m	12	Gouloua Evangelical Church	Mofu	Evan-gelical	2nd March 2006
Rachel	f	30	Zidim Baptist Church	Mofu	Baptist	27th February 2006

I also interviewed a group of seven women attending the French literacy class in Gadala, run by the government sponsored National Literacy Programme. This interview took place on 24th May 2007.

### **B.ii Literacy Teachers in Training**

I interviewed the following people while they were attending training courses to be teachers in the Mofu literacy programme organised by CALMO.

<u>Name</u>	<u>Sex</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Teacher Training Course</u>	<u>Religion</u>	<u>Date Interviewed</u>
Djouldé Zacharie	m	27	Zidim	Baptist	5th December 2005
Jacqueline Asta Mamiyam	f	26	Mokong	Catholic	30th November 2005
Koudkoula Gilbert	m	45	Zidim	Baptist	6th December 2005
Medi Joël	m	30	Zidim	Baptist	6th December 2005
Ndjidda Jean-Baptiste	m	43	Zidim	Baptist	6th December 2005
Prisca Sarabanay	f	19	Mokong	Adventist	30th November 2005

Salatou Obadia	m	24	Zidim	Baptist	5th December 2005
Sraviya Saïbou Markus	m	23	Mokong	Baptist	29th November 2005
Yaouba Jonatang	m	24	Mokong	Baptist	29th November 2005

### **B.iii Literacy Teachers and Programme Organisers**

In addition, I interviewed a number of people involved in the literacy programmes operating in the Mofu area.

<u>Name</u>	<u>Role</u>	<u>Date Interviewed</u>
Abdoulahi Hamadou	Area Literacy Coordinator, Sodecoton	14th February 2006
Bouba Nicolas	Literacy Organiser, CALMO	23rd May 2007
Farikou David	Literacy Organiser, CALMO	23rd May 2007
Gédéon Tatchum Moussi	Literacy Specialist, SIL Cameroon, Maroua	18th June 2007
Gondji David	Literacy Organiser, CALMO	23rd May 2007
Marie Behané	Literacy Teacher, CROPSEC, Mowo	4th April 2006
Marie-Louise Maïhouli	Literacy Coordinator, CROPSEC, Maroua	18th April 2006 and 11th June 2007
Marti Giger	Literacy Consultant, SIL Cameroon, Maroua	31st March 2006
Mitchibadou David	Literacy Teacher, Gouloua	30th March 2006
Moussa François	Literacy Coordinator, National Literacy Programme, Mokolo	14th May 2007
Soeur Aurore	Literacy Coordinator, Catholic Parish of Mokong	23rd May 2007
Tchidémé Augustin	Literacy Coordinator, Catholic Diocese of Maroua-Mokong	11th June 2007

### **C. Others**

I also interviewed the following people.

<u>Name</u>	<u>Role</u>	<u>Date Interviewed</u>
Bruno	agricultural researcher	28th June 2007
Jean Claude Fandar	research assistant, interpreter	29th June 2007
Jules	social science researcher	28th June 2007
Haman Jean-Paul	research assistant, transcriber	29th June 2007
Malay Etienne	former literacy teacher, resident of Mokong, domestic helper for Hollingsworths	22nd May 2007
Nathan Bello	Sodecoton official responsible for Fair-trade programme	20th June 2007

and, at various times, Ken and Judy Hollingsworth, coordinators of the Mofu-Gudur language development project.

## ***Appendix 2: Reading and Writing Interview Framework***

Aim: to establish

- 1) the approximate proportion of people who can read and write in a particular *quar-*  
*tier*.
- 2) what they read or write (or have read or written).
- 3) what reading and writing mean to them.

Introduction: We are doing research on reading and writing. Are you willing to answer our questions and allow us to record your responses? We will not share your answers with other people without your permission.

### A) Home

- 1) Who lives in this house? (sex, ages)
  - i) children: do they go to school? in which classes?
  - ii) adults: did you go to school? for how long?

### B) Life

- 1) What is your religion?
- 2) If you are the member of a church, which one?
- 3) Do you belong to a group of any kind, e.g. growers', Bible study?
- 4) Do you have any responsibilities – in the church, neighbourhood, village, in an association, in a party?
- 5) How do you earn your living?
- 6) Have you ever travelled outside of the Mofu area? When? Why?
- 7) Do you have a radio / bicycle / motorbike / mobile phone?

### C) Languages

- 1) Which languages do you speak?
- 2) Which languages do you understand, without being able to speak?
- 3) Which languages can you read? write?
- 4) How did you learn to read and write these languages?

### D) Reading and Writing

- 1) Do you have writing materials at home? (pens, pencils, paper...)
- 2) What have you written in the last week (month)?
- 3) What written texts do you have at home? – hand written? printed? (e.g. exercise books, personal papers, invoices, receipts, leaflets, books, calendars, diaries, Bible) Show us.
- 4) What have you read in the last week (month)?
- 5) Do you read or write anything in the context of your religion? (e.g. worship, studies, training ....)

E) For non-literate people

- 1) Have you ever sent a letter to someone? How did you do it?
- 2) Is not being able to read and write a problem to you? (Have you ever had a problem because you couldn't read something? Have you ever been prevented from doing something you wanted to do because you could not read or write? (examples?))

F) For literate people

- 1) What do you see as the value of literacy for you?
- 2) In your opinion, what problems do non-literate people have? (examples?)

Thank you! Are you willing for us to share your answers with other people? We will not reveal your name.

Would you be willing for us to ask you more questions about reading and writing in the future?

### ***Appendix 3: Reading and Writing Interview Framework for Literacy***

#### ***Learners***

Aim: to establish

- 1) their reasons for wanting to learn to read and write
- 2) what they read or write (or have read or written)
- 3) what reading and writing mean to them.

Introduction: We are doing research on reading and writing. Are you willing to answer our questions and allow us to record your answers? We will not share your answers with other people without your permission.

#### A) You and your life

- 1) Your name? Age?
- 2) Are you married?
- 3) How many children do you have? How old are they? Do they go to school?
- 4) Did you go to school? Up to what level?
- 5) Do you have any responsibilities in the church, or the village (e.g. women's group, local association)
- 6) How do you earn your living?

#### B) Languages

- 1) What languages can you speak?
- 2) How did you learn these languages?
- 3) Which languages do you understand, without being able to speak
- 4) Which languages can you read and write?

#### C) Literacy Learning

- 1) What lesson are you on in the literacy class?
- 2) Why are you coming to the literacy class?
- 3) Is reading and writing useful to you? How?
- 4) Has not being able to read and write ever caused you a problem? Give an example.
- 5) Have you ever received a letter from someone?
- 6) Have you ever sent a letter to someone?
- 7) Have you ever travelled outside of the Mofu area? When? Why?

Thank you! Are you willing for us to share your answers with other people? We will not reveal your name.





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