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## **The Role of Religion in Social Change: The Arrival of Christianity among the Dii People in Adamawa, Northern Cameroon (1934-1960)**

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Our ancestors used to live on this mountain named Mgbang Sii. They lived in several different villages that were all equal. No one decided over the others. When the Fulbe from Rey Bouba arrived, they tried to conquer us by starvation. They cut our harvest before it was ripe. But our ancestors made reservoirs of the grain "sàd", an herb whose grains are very small and which was the first culture known among the Dii. They put these grains in huge jars that were hidden in caverns in the mountain, in case of a siege (...). But our ancestors were beaten and fled, leaving behind their villages, where no one ever again set foot. But the "sàd" grains are still there, they sleep inside the mountain. But no one knows exactly where they are. Maybe, one day, a hunter will discover them? But no one dares touching them, no one knows what to do with them.<sup>1</sup>

With this myth of origin, a Dii from Mbé presented himself to the Canadian researcher Jean-Claude Muller. It is a history that emphasises the unity and peace that once reigned before the arrival of the Muslim Fulbe. But it is also a myth with an open end; it ends with questions and uncertainty concerning the future.

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<sup>1</sup> «Nos ancêtres vivaient autrefois sur cette montagne, nommée Mgbang Sii. Ils étaient groupés en un certain nombre de villages tous égaux. Aucun ne commandait à l'autre. Lorsque les Peuls de Rey-Bouba sont arrivés, ils voulurent nous conquérir en nous affamant. Ils prirent l'habitude de couper nos récoltes avant mûrissement. Mais nos ancêtres firent des réserves de la céréale sàd, une plante dont les grains sont minuscules et qui est la première culture connue des Dii. Ils mirent ces graines dans d'immenses jarres cachées dans des cavernes et des crevasses de la montagne, ceci en prévision d'un siège (...). Mais nos ancêtres furent vaincus et se dispersèrent, abandonnant leurs villages où il ne reste plus personne depuis lors. Cependant, les graines de sàd sont toujours là, qui dorment à l'intérieur de la montagne, mais personne ne sait exactement où elles sont. Peut-être, un jour, un chasseur les redécouvrira-t-il? Mais alors, personne n'osera y toucher et personne ne saura qu'en faire.» This version of the myth is presented by Muller in (Muller 1992: 4). Author's translation.

In this article we will follow the development of the Dii people, their symbolic departure from the mountain and their encounter with modernity and with the two world-religions, Islam and Christianity. The emphasis of the article will be on the active role played by the Dii in the encounter with the first Christian missionaries, and the development of Christian-Muslim relations in the region. A brief presentation of the Dii-people and the arrival of Islam and Christianity, will be followed by a sociological analysis of how the Dii manoeuvred through the spiritually and politically changing landscape of Africa in the first part of the twentieth century.

### The Dii

The Dii people (also known under the name Dourou/Duru<sup>2</sup>), who live in the northern Cameroon province of Adamawa, number between 40,000 and 50,000 people.<sup>3</sup> The Dii form one linguistic group with several dialects<sup>4</sup> among the approximately 250 different languages found in Cameroon. The Dii are spread in some one hundred villages numbering from some thirty inhabitants to around one thousand, but several chiefdoms can form a bigger village or a town. The majority of the Dii live on the so-called Dii plain along the paved road between the two big cities in the region, Ngaoundere and Garoua. Smaller Dii communities are also found on the Adamawa plateau and further northeast, near the lamidate of Rey Boubou. The administrative centre in the Dii region is Mbé, situated some 70 kilometres north of Ngaoundere. The Dii traditionally are farmers (sorghum, inyam and lately corn), but have also been engaged in trade and are renowned for their blacksmith clan. In the last decades, a large number have been employed in government administration and in the administration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Cameroon (EELC)<sup>5</sup> as a result of the high level of education among the last generation of Dii. There

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<sup>2</sup> Dourou/Duru was a name given to the Dii by the Mboum.

<sup>3</sup> No official population statistics are available, Podlewski estimated 35.000 in the late 1960s (Podlewski 1970: 24), Muller's more recent estimations vary between 30.000-40.000 (Muller 1997a: 8), 40.000 (Muller 1995: 39), 40-50.000 (Muller 2002: 13) and 50.000 (Muller 2000: 41), whereas Djesa proposes 50.000 (Djesa 2001: 41).

<sup>4</sup> Lee Bonhoff classifies the Dii as one language with four major dialects: *guum*, *mam'be*, *mam nà'a* and *paan* (which also include three minor dialects: *naan*, *saan* and *huun*) (Bonhoff and Kadia 1991).

<sup>5</sup> Eglise Evangélique Luthérienne du Cameroun.

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are no recent statistics<sup>6</sup> as to percentage of Christians and Muslims among the Dii, but leaders of the EELC estimate that approximately 50 per cent of the Dii are Christians.

The origin of the Dii is hard to trace in detail, and no written history is available. Jean-Claude Muller, a Canadian anthropologist who has been working among the Dii from 1990 onwards, claims that geographical origin is explained in many different ways by different heads of villages (Muller 1992: 12), but they all claim to have their roots in the region. The general impression is, however, that the majority of the Dii lived further north, in what is today the lamidate of Ray-Bouba, but was forced further south following the aggressive Fulbe expansion in the early nineteenth century (Lembezat 1961: 222; Muller 1997: 61-63; Podlewski 1970: 24). The actual placing of the many Dii villages is the result of migration following the mobility of the Dii, Fulbe, German, French, and to some extent Norwegian interference, the Dii being much influenced by Muslim conquerors, German and French colonialism and Norwegian Protestant missionaries.

Today an overall majority of the Dii present themselves as either Christians or Muslims. I have not yet met a single person claiming to be adherent of the traditional Dii religion,<sup>7</sup> and this is confirmed by Muller who claims that the term "traditionalist" has negative connotations, meaning "man with no value" (Muller 2000: 39-41). The traditional religion of the Dii contains many of the most central aspects and beliefs that are shared by the majority of sub-Saharan traditional religions<sup>8</sup>. The supreme God, Tayii, often presented by the metaphor "the big mountain" (Frobenius 1987: 150), is the creator of all things, but does not interfere unless there is a crisis regarding the creation. According to John Mbiti, a shared characteristic among most tribal images of God is that he is simultaneously transcendent

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<sup>6</sup> Podlewski's investigations from the late 1960s claim that on the Dii plain 46% were Muslims, 47% were Protestants, 4% were traditional practitioners (Podlewski 1970: 48). Long time NMS missionary among the Dii, Lars Lode, claims that around one third of the Dii on the plain are Christians, the rest mostly Muslims (Lode 1997: 36). They both agree that on the Adamawa plateau and further north, a larger percentage is Muslim.

<sup>7</sup> My contact with the Dii people goes back to my first fieldwork in the region in 1996. I later worked as a teacher in History of religion at *Institut Luthérien de Théologie de Meiganga* in Adamawa, Cameroun, from August 1998 to June 2003.

<sup>8</sup> African Traditional Religion is put in plural without entering into the discussion initiated by Laurenti Magessa as to whether African Traditional religion should be viewed as one world-religion or several independent religions. For further information, see Magessa 1997.

and immanent (Mbiti 1999: 29), and God does not receive prayers in traditional Dii religion. He is, however, offered a sacrifice to ensure fertility while the sorghum is still not ripe. This sacrifice is the most important public communication between the male Dii and God. The chief of the village, *gbanaa*, within three days of the new moon, collects a white ram, cuts the throat and pours the blood into a hole in the ground. The *gbanaa* addresses his invocations to God, asking for a good harvest, good health, many children and good luck for the hunters, not to mention the most important, which is good production for the blacksmiths. Then the hole is once more filled, a meal is prepared of couscous made by sorghum and the meat of the sheep, and the traditional beer is consumed in large quantities, women being excluded from the meal as well as from the sacrifice (Frobenius 1987: 142). Another tradition to secure the harvest is the practice of washing and painting the skull of the last *gbanaa*, in order to please the ancestors. This is done on the altar of the *gbanaa* (Muller 2000: 41).

There are no priests among the Dii. The ritual functions are shared by the chief, the circumciser, and by the blacksmith. In smaller villages the blacksmith may be responsible for the circumcision. According to Muller circumcision is "the main cultural and social backbone of Dii political and social structure" (Muller 1996: 102), and the structure of society is organised according to the roles played by important persons during the rite of circumcision. The actual rite of circumcision is a rite of initiation, making young boys men, and making them Dii. The first objective of the rite is to separate the boys from the girls, all details concerning the circumcision being hidden from the female Dii. The next objective is to learn to control the body and respect the elders by accepting the pain that follows the circumcision and the teaching that follows (Muller 1993: 532). The young boys, from nine to fifteen years, stay for three days with the circumciser before going into the bush for approximately one month where they learn "the secret language" and suffer more corporal pain<sup>9</sup>.

The importance of circumcision is also connected to the knives used by the circumciser. The knives are regarded as divinities or spirits, *yoob*. They are sometimes called *zag*, panther, because they are said to be as dangerous as this animal, and between each ceremony they are put in jars and hidden in the mountains. The knives can also be used as judges in certain ceremonies

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<sup>9</sup> For more information about the circumcision among the Dii, see Muller 2002).

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where, hidden underneath leaves, the knives will harm the person that is guilty (Muller 2000: 41).

Today few young Dii are familiar with details of their own tradition. On the road towards "modernity" and the interaction with independent Cameroon, Islam and Christianity, certain rites have been abandoned. These rites were either banned by the government through campaigns of islamisation in the late 1960s and early 1970s, or by the influence of Christian missionaries that judged certain practices as "evil and sinful". However, as we shall see, the Dii have played an active part in the transformation of their own identity, and they have kept certain traditions and transformed their initial meaning. Circumcision is still practised, even if the Dii themselves claim that the rite has gone from being "religion" to being merely "tradition"<sup>10</sup>.

### **The arrival of Islam**

The first Muslims, the nomad Fulbe, arrived in the region before the eighteenth century (Hiskett 1984: 53; Mohammadou 1981: ; Njeuma 1997: 9), and exercised friendly relations with the Dii, who welcomed the herders and their cattle. The Fulbe is a semi-nomadic people who today number approximately 15 million people from Senegal to the Central African Republic. Although the origin of the Fulbe is blurred, most scholars agree that the Fulbe moved east from Senegal (Futa Toro and Macina) towards Nigeria between the thirteenth and the fifteenth century<sup>11</sup>. Migration from Bornu (present day Nigeria) to Adamawa followed different patterns, but according to the sources it was always friendly. One example of the Fulbe leaders that were settled in Northern Cameroon before the *jihād* is the Fulbe ruler of Ray-Bouba who settled in Rey through marriage with a local princess (Njeuma 1978: 13).

<sup>10</sup> This is affirmed by Muller 2000, p. 40.

<sup>11</sup> According to Mohammadou the Fulbe clans that later inhabited Adamawa originated from Masina, the old Mali empire, and migrated east towards Adamawa between the thirteenth and the fifteenth century. He continues to argue that nomad Fulbe visited Adamawa from the late thirteenth century, and that during the seventeenth century an increasing number of Fulbe brought their cattle to what is today Northern Cameroon. Around 1700 the first Fulbe settled in Rey through matrimonial alliances with the Dâma and the Môno (Mohammadou 1981). Also in Garoua, Gurin and Chamba Fulbe leaders were installed as Muslim rulers before the *jihād* (Njeuma 1978: 24). The level of Islamic knowledge among the first nomad Fulbe is difficult to evaluate, but it is established that Islam has been present in Northern Cameroon from the early eighteenth century.

This harmony lasted until the arrival of the Fulbe *jihad* warriors in the early nineteenth century. Following the success of Uthman dan Fodio and the establishment of his caliphate in Sokoto (Nigeria), the *jihad* spread to what is today called Adamawa, a region which was named after the local leader of the *jihad*, Moddibo Adama. Uthman dan Fodio was a great politician, but he was also a spiritual leader, an author, and an intellectual whose intention was to reform the nominal Islam practised by his Haoussa neighbours. In a number of letters to the Hausa ruler of Bornu, Uthman argued in favour of the Fulbe right to convert people to an Islam purified of "heathen" practices, and the right to defend the Fulbe community against attacks from the Hausa chiefs (Njeuma 1978: 20-21; Trimmingham 1962: 195). Towards the year 1804 Uthman lanced his *jihad* and created the Sokoto caliphate. Dan Fodio's *jihad* was probably inspired by other Muslim revolutions in West Africa (Futa Toro and Agadez) and the teaching of his personal professors. Jibril bin 'Umar al-Aqdisa from Agadez. Jibril was an intense and zealous religious personality who was influenced by the great Sufi revival around the Azhar mosque in Cairo in the second half of the eighteenth century. He introduced Uthman to the qadiriyya sufi brotherhood. This mystic reform movement in the Middle East was a response to the general turbulence that the Islamic world faced around the end of the eighteenth century. It was also a reaction against the Wahhabisme in Saudi-Arabia that did not accept the veneration of *walis* (holy men) among the Sufi and the pilgrimages to their tombs (Hiskett 1973: 40-41, 60-62). Jibril was also aware of European interference with Muslim affairs in the Orient, which leads us to conclude that the Sokoto revolution was dependent on local events, but that it also was an echo of political and intellectual movements in the Middle East (Drønen and Koulagna 2002: 61).

But the *jihad* in present-day Cameroon soon took a more materialistic turn. The local people were offered peace and submission or war, which often was easily won by the militarily superior Fulbe horsemen<sup>12</sup>. The local people were rarely converted to Islam, which would have been a hindrance to the large-scale slave trade introduced by the Fulbe, Muslims being restricted by the Koran from making a fellow Muslim believer a slave (Bah 1993: 82; Lacroix 1966: 402; Njeuma 1978: 65). To what extent the military movement in Adamawa followed the initial religious ideas of Uthman dan

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<sup>12</sup> For more information about the military strength and strategy of the Fulbe in Adamawa, see (Bah 1982).

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Fodio, or to what extent the *jihad* only became a pretext for the Fulbe to gain more grazing land for their cattle and material wealth from the slave trade, is heavily debated among scholars<sup>13</sup>. What many of them seem to forget is that within the Islamic tradition there is no contradiction between spiritual and material progress. Following the example of Muhammad and the first four caliphs, material prosperity was actually a sign of spiritual blessing, and it is therefore probable that the Fulbe conquerors initially saw material gain as part of the *jihad*. The Fulbe themselves interpreted the military expansion as part of a religious project. To question why the Fulbe did not put more effort into converting the conquered people and often refused to convert them (Gausset 2002: 169), is reasonable, and shows the ambiguity of the Fulbe conquest. It is beyond doubt that the *jihad* soon took a materialistic turn, and that not all of the Fulbe chiefs saw the religious obligations to convert the native population as the most important one. But this does not disqualify the movement from being, in essence, a religious movement. This leads me to conclude with Smith that "The ambiguous character of Shehu dan Fodio's *jihad* derives from the ambiguous character of *jihad* itself." (Smith 1966: 419).

Muller's historical investigation states that harmony reigned between the Dii and the Fulbe before the *jihad* (Muller 1997: 62). The few Fulbe in the area were treated as equal trading partners, their cattle brought milk and meat, a welcomed supplement to the Dii diet. The Fulbe profited from the Dii farming products, and their iron skills, the Dii being the only group in the region who knew the "secret of the iron". This harmony ended with the military invasion in the early nineteenth century. The Dii people claim that they never were slaves under the Fulbe, which is partly true since the Dii fled from areas where slavery was a threat. Several Dii villages, however, were conquered (Mohammadou 1979: 166-167) and had to pay heavy taxes to the *lamido*<sup>14</sup> in Rei. Other Dii groups moved their villages from the immediate lamidate of Rey, but agreed on his demand for soldiers for slave-raiding expeditions. This was also the case in the Ngaoundere lamidate, where the Dii and the more organised Mboum, who initially inhabited the

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<sup>13</sup> A materialistic interpretation of the *jihad* is presented by several scholars who claims that the *jihad* for most of the Fulbe was a political act (Bah 1993: 76; Gausset 2002: 168; Mohammadou 1981: 238). Other scholars argue that religion played a major role in the military expansion of the Fulbe (Hansen 2000: 81-82; Njeuma 1978: 66).

<sup>14</sup> *Lamido* (pl. *lamibbe*) was the title of the local muslim rulers that were subordinated under the Emir of Yola.

Ngaoundere plateau, seem to have avoided the slave-status and contributed to the army of the Fulbe (Hansen 2000: 48). But the Dii, along with the other *kirdi* (pagan) people, had to pay tribute to the *lamido* in Ngaoundere (Burnham 1980: 49).

The process of islamisation among the Dii was slow and followed the pattern of prestige, conversion of chiefs and the participation in trade (Bah 1993: 82-83). In general it was the impact of the Sufi brotherhoods in the early twentieth century that led to the islamisation of the ordinary people in northern Cameroon (Bah 1996). Curiously, Muller argues that the arrival of the missionaries not only opened the way for Christianity, but also for freedom of religion in a wider sense so that it became easier for some Dii to also convert to Islam (Muller 1997: 70). This information is interesting, but further investigation has to be carried out in order to understand these statements properly.

After independence in 1960 and the arrival in power of the Muslim president, Ahidjo (a Fulbe from Garoua), Muslims, and especially Fulbe, held all important political posts in northern Cameroon (Azarya 1976). This influenced very much the process of Islamisation, since anyone aspiring to a job in the administration in the North had to be a Muslim. This state-sponsored campaign of Islamisation reached the Dii especially between 1967 and 1969 (Muller 2000: 45) when the Cameroon State built mosques in major villages that did not have a house for prayers built in cement. Traditional religion suffered hard from this campaign, altars and "idols" being destroyed and knives of circumcision thrown into rivers along with other "charms" and traditional protection. This missionary effort from the State also touched the Christians and led to the destruction of several chapels<sup>15</sup>. We can then conclude that the process of trying to convert the Dii to Islam was a slow and mainly peaceful process, interrupted by violent incidents the first years of the jihad and through the turbulent end of the 1960s.

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<sup>15</sup> These events, also worth further studies, will not be part of the period analysed later in this article.



### **The arrival of Christianity**

The first Christian missionary in Adamawa<sup>16</sup>, the American Eugene Gunderson, arrived in Ngaoundere in 1923. Christian mission was established in Cameroon with the arrival of Alfred Saker from the London Baptist Mission in Douala in 1841, with the first Catholic missionary arriving half a century later, in 1885 (Mveng 1963: 451-452, 461). But the colonial administrators were reluctant to the establishing of missions in the north, where they feared problems with the ruling Muslim Fulbe. It was thus not until the arrival of Gunderson that Christianity was introduced in Adamawa. Gunderson first got permission to work in Ngaoundere, but he soon travelled southeast to the Mbere region to seek timber for construction. Here the Gbaya warmly welcomed him, and Gunderson therefore prolonged his stay and started his work among the Gbaya in Mboula. In the meantime Gunderson's permission to establish a mission in Ngaoundere expired, so that when the first Norwegian missionaries, Flatland, Thrana, Oseland and Nikolaisen, arrived in Ngaoundere on February 6, 1925, they received permission from the French administrator to establish their work there (Lode 1990: 12-15).

The first Norwegian missionaries were funded by a small society called *Sudanmisjonen*<sup>17</sup> (The Sudan Mission). Fredrik Müller, who in 1916 attended a meeting in Denmark where the lack of missionaries in Sudan was discussed, was deeply moved by this challenge and on his return to Norway he established a new mission society, the Sudan Mission (Nicolaisen and Endresen 1949: 296). The background for the general engagement for Sudan in Scandinavia was the international mission conference in Edinburgh 1910, where the "apostle-belt" strategy was introduced. The idea was to establish a "belt" of mission-stations across sub-Saharan Africa to prevent Islam from expanding further south. The focus of the conference was not to evangelise Muslims, but rather to reach the "pagans" with the Gospel before Islam did. The focus of the Norwegian missionaries in Ngaoundere was therefore to work among the pagan Mboum, and not the Muslim Fulbe.

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<sup>16</sup> The first foreign Christian Mission to be established in northern Cameroon was the American Lutheran Bretheren Mission who started their work north of Garoua in 1918 (Sandnes 1991: 48).

<sup>17</sup> The work of *Sudanmisjonen* in Cameroon was practically organised by NMS (Norsk Misjonsselskap), and in 1939 *Sudanmisjonen* became an integral part of NMS.

For the first years, the Norwegian missionaries were busy with construction and language learning. They thus depended on evangelists from the south to start their work among the Mboum. But the people attending the meetings in Ngaoundere these first years were mainly construction workers and people from the south, and it soon became clear that the Mboum in Ngaoundere were much more influenced by Islam than had been first assumed. The missionaries therefore started to look for new areas to proclaim the Gospel. After having visited the plain north of Ngaoundere, mainly inhabited by the Dii people, Thrana proposed to the Norwegian mission conference in 1934 to expand their work to this area. He argued that the Dii was the least Islamised people in the Ngaoundere region, and that it was only a question of time before the Muslim elite in Ngaoundere would emphasise the expansion of Islam, at least to the Dii elite. But since Rey Bouba was closed to missionaries, at least with the present "Sultan of Rey", Thrana argued that the area was too small for building a station, and that local evangelists and teachers, supervised from Ngaoundere, should start the work. The conference then decided to send the evangelist Njemba to live in Mbé and also work in Karna. Two teachers were also hired, Atuba in Mbé, and the Martin in Karna. Altogether eleven young Christians from the south were employed as teachers and evangelists by the conference this year; five had been trained as catechists by the missionaries.<sup>18</sup>

From day one, it was education that was the method for establishing Christianity among the Dii.<sup>19</sup> Through the school, the mission received its first catechumens who later became the backbone of the church. The Norwegian mission soon established schools in all major villages on the Dii plain with considerable success, and the Dii were favourable to this expansion.<sup>20</sup> In 1951 a Protestant mission station was built in Mbé, a project accelerated by rumours that a Catholic mission was about to be established in the same area. The arrival of Catholic missionaries in Karna, a village some ten kilometres south of Mbé, the following year, triggered a Protestant-

<sup>18</sup> Conference report, Sudan Mission/NMS, Ngaoundere 1934 (NMS archives, Stavanger), p. 17-25. According to Lode, it was Njemba and Emini who finally were installed by Thrana in Mbé, and Martin was installed in Karna in July 1934 (Lode 1990: 43).

<sup>19</sup> Bengt Sundkler writes «Cameroon welcomed the missions, not so much because of their religious message, but because of their schools. They were all 'asking for book'.» (Sundkler and Steed 2000: 266). Even if this comment is directed at the growth of Christianity in the southern part of Cameroon, I think it also covers the experience of the missions in the north.

<sup>20</sup> Podlewski (1970: 24) comments on the surprisingly high level of school attendance among the Dii, stating that it must clearly be the record in northern Cameroon.

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Catholic "race for souls", and it seems that the Dii took advantage of this competition. The Dii were now in a position where they could demand more qualified teachers or threaten the Norwegian missionaries with "conversion to the enemy", an interesting scenario. The Dii also profited from the building of dispensaries and later on also from an agricultural project, efforts made by the Norwegian that created strong ties between the Dii and the mission.

Christianity was, however, not established among the Dii without problems, and the success of the mission in the years before World War II can be described as a roller coaster. The two existing political authorities, the Fulbe and the French colonial administration, had ambiguous feelings about the establishing of Christian mission among the Dii, and the missionaries were dependent on support from at least one of the two to be able to maintain and expand their work. We shall in the following sections suggest that the first years of Christian-Muslim relations in the area was a fight about goodwill among the French colonial administrators, and that this later developed into a political controversy between the Dii and the Fulbe, religion increasingly becoming a part of the conflict. To state the reason for this hypothesis we shall now further analyse two episodes that include fighting over colonial goodwill and the development of a Dii-Fulbe conflict based on the political and religious new-orientation of the Dii.

## **The development of Christian-Muslim Relations**

### **The "crisis in Duru" – a Fight for Colonial Goodwill**

Reading the reports from the early mission conferences, it soon becomes clear that three opponents were dealt with, as the introduction to the conference in Yoko 1936, written by the supervisor on the field, Halfdan Endresen clearly states:

Our relation to the administration has been the best, and it has been easy to obtain permissions for new stations. The Catholics have been relatively calm the last year, but it seems that they are preparing a new offensive, and there are things that indicate that they now consider starting their work in the northern part of our mission field too. The passive resistance of the Muhammadanians has been felt more strongly than earlier. It will probably increase proportionally with the growth of our work. Our success among the Duru-tribe seems particularly to be a thorn in their eye. They can now no longer exploit the Duru, like they did before. Until now they have,

however, not dared to create visible obstacles, as they understand that the administration is behind us and protects us.<sup>21</sup>

The report starts by referring to the colonial administration, which shows that without their goodwill, the work of the mission would be very difficult. Second is a European opponent, the French Catholics, and third is the local opponent, the Muslim administration ruled by the local king, the *lamido*.

The general impression we get from the written and oral sources available is that the Dii had to pay heavy tribute to the *lamido* in Ngaoundere. The colonial administration had stated that ten per cent of the harvest should be versed (Meaning of 'verse'? See p. 4 for another problematic use of the same word.) to the king, but it is obvious that this was not respected by the *lamido*. Kåre Lode also claims that the *lamido* at this point sent his *doggaries* (his personal soldiers) to capture young Dii boys and girls to serve as slaves in his palace (Lode 1990: 43).<sup>22</sup> When the Dii so quickly<sup>23</sup> accepted and welcomed the missionaries, we must try to analyse the background of this encounter. Very soon the missionaries started to interfere with the established relationship between the Fulbe and the Dii. Whether this was an explicit demand from the Dii, or this was a general idea among the missionaries of liberating an oppressed people, is hard to tell from the sources. However, Muller's article, with the peculiar title *Merci à vous, les Blancs, de nous avoir libérés!* (Thanks to you, the white, for having liberated us!) indicates that the Dii saw the collaboration of the mission and the colonial administration as a joint force that liberated them from the Fulbe.

<sup>21</sup> «Forholdet til administrasjonen har vært det beste, og det har vært lett å få nye ansøknings om utestasjoner innvilget. Katolikkene har holdt sig forholdsvis rolige i det forløpne år, men de synes å forberede seg til et nytt fremstøt, og der er ting som tyder på at de nu akter å ta fatt også på den nordlige delen av vår misjonsmark. Muhammedanernes passive motstand har vært mer følbar enn tidligere. Den vil rimeligvis øke proposjonalt med vårt arbeids vekst. Vår inngang blant durustammen synes særlig å være fulanerne en torn i øiet. De kan jo nu ikke lenger usett utsuge duruene, som de tidligere gjorde. Hittil har de dog ikke våget åpenbart å legge oss hindringer i veien, da de forstår at administrasjonen står bak oss og beskytter oss.» Conference report, Sudan Mission/NMS, Yoko 1936, p. 3. Author's translation.

<sup>22</sup> It must be added that there were different categories of slaves, and as Hansen (1992) rightly claims, they were treated in many different ways. But it seems obvious that Lode here refers to the capturing of young boys and girls against the will of their parents, thus what we normally refer to as slavery.

<sup>23</sup> All the Conference reports states is that the Dii was open to the work of the mission, and Muller (1997) confirms this.

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1937 turned out to be a crucial year for the mission on the Dii plain. The Dii understood that the missionaries could help them with the heavy burden laid upon them by the *lamido* and his tax collectors, and that now was the time - and they were right. After having received complaints from the Dii, and after having obtained support from the *chef de subdivision*, Delcroix and Endresen took action. When he left for his vacation he paid a visit to the High Commissioner in Yaounde to discuss the situation of the Dii. The result of this meeting was that Mbé became *chef de canton*, and that the *lamido* lost his power over the Dii. The Dii should, on their proper initiative, pay a tribute to the *lamido*, but they should themselves decide the size of it. The *lamido's* tax collectors no longer had the right to visit the Dii-plain (Lode 1990: 44). Things looked good for the Dii, but the administrative fight over the Dii-plain was not resolved with this.

During Endresen's absence several of the teachers employed by the mission mistreated the children, forcing them to hard labour on their own fields, and forcing them to attend school. The French administration was informed, and one of the teachers was sentenced to two and a half years in prison. In his report, Fløttum writes that he agrees with Delcroix that the teacher was guilty of the charges.<sup>24</sup> But the real problem for the mission started when the new *chef de région*, Mr. Jaubert, interfered. He was obviously not so favourable to the work of the mission, and visited village after village, telling the parents that they did not *have to* send their children to school. According to Fløttum, the interpreters (all the *lamido's* men) translated this as that the parents *should not* send their children to school.<sup>25</sup> And since this was in the middle of the harvest, most parents followed the administration's advice and took their children out of the school. A further blow to the mission was the news of the transfer of Delcroix, who all along had supported the missionaries. According to the Norwegian missionaries, it was Jaubert who was behind the transfer, and that this was a favour granted to the *lamido*. The missionaries further saw an alliance between Jaubert and the *lamido* in the next move by Jaubert, when he declared all the mission authorisations for schools among the Dii, invalid (Lode 1990: 45). It is clear that with Jaubert as *chef de région*, new authorisations would be difficult to obtain, and that no Dii would dare to sign an application that was bound to be

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<sup>24</sup> Conference report, Sudan Mission/NMS 1937, p. 11.

<sup>25</sup> Conference report, Sudan Mission/NMS 1937, p. 12.

denied. It is also obvious that the *lamido* was about to show the Dii that he still held considerable power, and the mission's work among the Dii here came to a crucial point.

The missionaries protested heavily against this new order and by reason or by luck, the details of what happened in the French colonial administration is not quite clear, Mr. Notary replaced Jaubert as *chef de région*.

Hansen's analyses of the French colonial archives show that Jaubert was against the establishing of a *canton* in Mbé, and that he thought that an indirect rule through the *lamido* was the most efficient way to control northern Cameroon. This attitude of Jaubert was well known by the French, he was even called "*le boy du lamido*" in a letter from Delcroix to the High Commissioner (Hansen 1992: 75). The official policy of the French was anyhow to rule larger ethnic groups directly through a *chef de canton*. The new *chef de région* put aside Jaubert's demands and told the mission that they could continue their work as before, and according to Endresen's report in 1939, Notary told him that "if there should be any more problems in Duru, we should arrange it amicably".<sup>26</sup> Notary's further investigations about the *lamido* and his abuse of power towards the Dii, led to the calling of the *lamido* to Yaoundé, where, amongst others, Delcroix's testimony, forced *lamido* Abbo to resign, and he was exiled to Tignere (Lode 1990: 45-46).

The "crisis in Duru" was a serious set back for the missionaries, but it was a most important administrative victory, and it was a considerable victory for the Dii. The French colonial administration was all along apprehensive of mission activity in the North. The Norwegian mission had to establish their station on a hill far from the city centre of Ngaoundere, and they were not allowed to build a church, not even arrange meetings in town. The mission's report from 1934 even claims that the French administrator during a meeting with the mission told them that the *lamido* had complained about the singing of Christian hymns in a private house<sup>27</sup>. This shows that the Norwegian mission never had a *carte blanche* to expand their work as they thought it best. The "Duru crisis" shows, however, that even if the French wanted to respect the *lamido*, and to use his hierarchy to maintain order,

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<sup>26</sup> «...at om det blev noen historier i Duru i fremtiden, skulde vi ordne det i minnelighet.» Conference report, Sudan Mission/NMS 1939, p. 4. Author's translation.

<sup>27</sup> Conference report, Sudan Mission/NMS 1934, p. 2.

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they also saw it in their interest to limit the political influence of the traditional king over other ethnic groups (Hansen 1992: 62).

For the Dii people, the outcome of the conflict was of great importance. It clearly showed that the missionaries heard their complaints, and that the missionaries had the power to influence the colonial government and help them to be "liberated" from the *lamido* in Ngaoundere. To talk about a somewhat full liberation from the Fulbe is an exaggeration. The Dii seem to have been relatively free even before the arrival of the missionaries, and the influence of the *lamido* continued to be strong also in the years to come. However, the Dii-plain had become a *canton*, and the road toward social change was indicated by the mission schools. It seems that the Dii-mission alliance was a win-win situation for both of them. The Dii first of all accepted the missionaries because they brought with them new and interesting information, through the school, and through a new religion. The isolated role that the message of Christ played in this alliance is hard to evaluate, and demands a deeper study. But I would argue that the Dii in the missionaries detected an ally, who could help them out of an unsatisfying political situation, and who brought with them interesting information that gave hope for a better spiritual and material future.

The initial phase of the work among the Dii was by the missionaries interpreted as a fight against the *lamido* over goodwill among the French colonial administration. What was seen as a conspiracy between the *lamido* and Jaubert caused problems for the missionaries, but the outcome of the conflict was that the missionaries gained confidence in their work and in their ability to influence the colonial government. This self-confidence was important when the missionaries later challenged both the *lamido* and the French authorities in the question of abolishing slavery.

**The Dii – Rey Bouba Controversy: A Social reorganisation of the Dii**

According to missionary reports, it was only the lack of qualified personnel that restrained the expansion of the mission on the Dii plain in the post-war period. One Norwegian missionary wrote in his report in 1950 that it would be possible to establish congregations in twenty to thirty new Dii villages in addition to the seventeen villages where Christian work already existed (Lode 1990: 89). It was also mentioned that the fear of the Catholics

accelerated the work, and that the Dii profited from this "race". Even the pressure from Islam is now more felt on the Dii plain, an area hardly touched by Islam twenty years earlier. As Endresen put it in his opening speech to the Norwegian missionaries in 1956:

The Catholics prepare themselves to "conquer northern Cameroon" – they even state it openly –, and the Muhammadanians are becoming all the more aggressive. If we can not get teachers to the places that are now open for us, we risk that the Catholics beat us or that the Muhammadanians get ahead and close the door on us. Now really is the time to buy time by the forelock.<sup>28</sup>

It now became clear that the Islamic leaders in Ngaoundere looked upon the mission as a serious challenge to their traditional influence over the non-Muslim population. The loss of political power to the colonial administration, and the arrival of a religious competitor slowly shifted the Fulbe focus from a mainly political influence to more emphasis on religion and conversion of the non-Muslims. In Rey Bouba the story was a little different. In exchange for military support, the *lamido* of Rey was granted political "independence" from the French, and the non-Fulbe population in this "state within the state" had to pay high taxes to the *lamido*. Since the fumbling efforts to establish a church in the late 1930s had failed, this land had been closed for the mission. In 1952, however, Baba Rey accepted that some evangelists could start working in his area.

It seems clear that the work of the mission among the Dii had consequences on the perception of ethnic identity and social organisation. The Dii is traditionally, like the Gbaya further southeast, an *asefal* people, which means that no chief has ever reigned over the Dii, but that each village had its own chief (Hansen 1992: 72). The Dii argument for social organisation was that each village needs a chief to organise the rite of circumcision, a chief of soil to arrange the place of circumcision, a circumciser, and a blacksmith to fabricate the knives used in the ceremony (Muller 1997: 61). By the time of the arrival of the Fulbe it was estimated that only 150-200 persons inhabited the largest Dii villages. The chief in one village did therefore not

<sup>28</sup> «Katolikkene forbereder seg til å« erobre Nord-Kamerun » – det sier de åpent –, og muhammedanerne blir stadig mer aggressive. Kan vi ikke snart skaffe lærere til de stedene som nå står åpne for oss, risikerer vi at katolikkene kommer oss i forkjøpet eller at muhammedanerne får overtaket og stenger dørene for oss. Nå gjelder det i sannhet å kjøpe den beleilige tid.» Conference report NMS 1956, p. 4. Author's translation.



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necessarily gain the respect a chief worthy in another village. Around 1950 reports from missionaries estimated that Mbé contained approximately 3,000 inhabitants. After being made *chef de canton*, the chief in Mbé and his village slowly grew in respect among other Dii villages. This was due to the reorganisation of administrative structure made by the colonial administration, but to some extent we have seen that the Norwegian missionaries also influenced this development. According to Lode, the Mbé chief was a pagan who welcomed the missionaries (Lode 1990: 89). Muller claims that he was a Muslim who followed the traditional Dii religion and sent his children to the protestant school (Muller 1997: 61). In any case it seems that his newly won position gradually moved the chief to try to reorganise the structure of Dii chiefdoms. In 1955, he travelled to Gamba, a Dii village inside Rey Bouba. The reason behind this visit is somewhat blurry, but according to Lode it was interpreted by many as an occasion for the chief of Mbé to be acclaimed chief of all the Dii. When the *lamido* learned this he became furious, and as a response to the political provocation of the Mbé chief, he expelled all the Christian evangelists from his area. Another incident, which added to Baba Rey's anger, was that one of the evangelists encouraged the Christians to refuse to participate in the forced labours imposed by the *lamido*. After negotiations carried out by the mission leaders, they were allowed to replace three of the evangelists, on the condition that neither of them came from Mbé, and these new evangelists were regularly convoked for forced labours (Lode 1990: 89).<sup>29</sup>

It is evident that the *lamido* interpreted the incidents as an attempt by the Dii to weaken his political position and his income. A change had taken place among the Dii. From being a loosely united ethnic group, organised in small villages, the Mbé chief now was about to proclaim himself chief of all the Dii. The *lamido*, of course, reacted. Most interesting is the way in which he reacted, by expelling all the Christian evangelists. I think it is within reason to interpret the reactions of the *lamido* as a strike against, not only the Dii, showing increasing ethnic self-confidence, but at Christianity, not only as a religious, but also as a socio-political opponent. The evangelists were expelled as representatives of the emerging church; Christianity was thus seen as a part of the Dii, or at least as part of what is new among the Dii-people.

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<sup>29</sup> Conference report, NMS 1957, p. 4.

### **The impact of religion on social change**

The Dii people went through a series of profound social changes in the period from 1934 to 1960. After one hundred years of Fulbe domination, and more than thirty years of colonial presence, another influential actor appeared on the socio-political stage: the Norwegian missionaries. In sociological terms, religion can both promote status quo and change, and in the following we shall try to analyse the role of religion in the changes experienced by the Dii.

The classical Marxist interpretation of religion is the interest theory, stating that religion is an ideology used by the ruling class to maintain political domination. It would be rather easy to simply state that to the Fulbe, Islam was the ideology used to dominate the Dii and other non-Muslim groups, only converting the elite to be used as allies in this project. Neo-Marxian approaches to religion have, however, reached more complex conclusions, as they find that religion can be relatively autonomous from the economic substructure (McGuire 2002: 246). This insight is important, in order to see that religion is often linked with, but not necessarily reduced to economic interests. We have already stated that the Fulbe *jihad* was more than the search for new grazing land and slaves; it was a spiritual project that also included these material elements. It is also obvious that the ruling Fulbe, faced with the new opponents, tried to make the French colonial administration an ally, an ally who, although it had reduced the *lamido*'s power considerably, still kept him in power over the *kirdi* population. The French colonial administration was, however, an unpredictable ally for the Fulbe. The French colonial politics was less consistent than the English "indirect rule", practised in neighbouring Nigeria, where the Muslim chiefs were granted more power and independence than the *lamibbe* in Cameroon. The result was, as we have seen, that the attitude towards the Fulbe, the Dii and the missionaries was more related to the person in charge than to clear guidelines from the colonial administration. The aim of the French was to maintain peace and govern effectively, the idea being that the colonial administration should be economically self-sustaining (Hansen 1992: 83). Muller claims that the major reason behind the French resistance to the mission was the experience they had had with Christian groups in the South who at an early stage started to discuss independence from the colonial administration (Muller 1997: 64).

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What then was the role of the Protestant missionaries, and why did they have success among the Dii people? From a perspective of comparative religion, it is obvious that the Christian message presented at the same time rupture and continuity with traditional religion, at a time when a change in worldview was inevitable for the Dii people. The Fulbe arrived as representatives of modernity in terms of participants in a world-wide religious community, as masters of a written tradition in a foreign language, as superiors in war and trade, and with the prestige of impressive clothing, high upon the horse's back. Add to this, the arrival of German and French colonial armies and the building of a new road that linked the land of the Dii with the South and the ocean far away. Things changed, or they fell apart, as is described with such melancholy by Achebe (Achebe 1967).

This was the setting into which the Norwegian missionaries arrived. They took special interest in the Dii and offered them a ticket on the train to the New World. Until now the Dii had been relatively badly treated by the Fulbe and ignored by the French. On the other hand, with the missionaries came people from far away who took an interest in their particular situation. One should not underestimate the obvious psychological effects of such an encounter. Max Weber, in his studies on religion, was especially interested in locating historical settings that he called "points of religious breakthrough". These are periods when certain circumstances pushed the social group either toward a radical new way of acting or toward reaffirmation of the old way (McGuire 2002: 247; Parsons 1965: xxxiii; Weber 1965: 260).<sup>30</sup> I think it is possible to interpret "the Duru-crisis" as a "breakthrough" where an alliance was confirmed between the mission and the Dii, a point that opened the way for both a material and a spiritual reorientation. To continue with the Weberian language, one is tempted to say that both the Norwegians who organised the missionary enterprise and the native evangelists from the south who proclaimed the message, played the role of "emissary prophets" (McGuire 2002: 252).<sup>31</sup> With heavenly authority they confronted the established order by proclaiming the message from God. It was a message of change, of rupture with old traditions like sacrifices to the spirits and ancestor devotion. This breakthrough is by the missionaries interpreted as the act of God, who through his message of equality and liberty transforms society.

<sup>30</sup> I also agree with McGuire that it is possible to interpret *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber 1971) as the analysis of one particular breakthrough, that of the development of the capitalistic mode of socioeconomic organization (McGuire 2002: 248).

<sup>31</sup> For further information about Weber's interpretation of prophets, see (Weber 1965: 46-59).

This message undoubtedly changed the attitude of the Dii. But Muller claims that the missionaries did not always understand the consequences of the ways in which the Dii received this message. According to some of the first converts to Islam, it was the preaching of the missionaries that opened up the way to Islam for them. The message of "all men being equal before God" was understood as a rupture with the Fulbe way of linking religion to ethnic identity and political hierarchy. I will not, without further studies, accept what Muller argues, that the Lutheran missionaries preached that there were two equal ways to God, Islam and Christianity. Nevertheless, it is possible that certain Dii interpreted it this way. A side effect of the "religious breakthrough" was then that freedom of religion became an important signpost on the road to modernity, paved with western schools, dispensaries and spiritual reorientation.

What then was the content of this spiritual reorientation, so often ignored by social scientists? Let me first say that this is a complex field of study that needs further investigations before solid conclusions can be reached. However, a few things can be said about the religious change among the Dii. The first point that should be mentioned is that whereas the arrival of the Gospel caused a rupture with traditional religion, at the same time it promoted continuity. The message of the Christian God was not presented to the Dii in a vacuum, but it was related to the already existing conception of a supreme god, a force that created the world, and maintained its relations with creation through fertility rites and sacrifices. However vague the idea of a god was among the Dii, it was there, and it became an important hermeneutical bridge in the sermons of the missionaries. Studies carried out by Christensen among the Gbaya show how a contextualised theology was accepted and further developed by the native Christians (Christensen 1990). We might say that the overall religious cosmology of the Dii stayed intact, whereas the missionaries introduced certain new central categories, such as Jesus, the Son of God, sin and redemption. This also explains why many traditional practices (like circumcision) and beliefs continued to exist among the Dii, even after conversion to Christianity.

The second point concerns the African worldview. To analyse changes taking place in Africa with Western analytic tools asks for precaution. We have first of all to consider what McGuire calls "the cognitive framework of the culture" (McGuire 2002: 258), and in African traditional society the

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religious mode of action is the only mode that can deal with serious changes in society. Several theories about the growth of religious movements focus on economic or status deprivation, and the development of mission-initiated churches is often explained by material gain for the natives. Was this the situation for the Dii? It is difficult to argue that the mission had its initial success among the Dii because the missionaries arrived with material wealth, and gave the local people hope of similar gains. The first schools were simple huts built and maintained by the pupils and their parents. An African teacher (always complaining about his low salary)<sup>32</sup> was the daily contact with the mission, and he did not always treat their children very well. The white missionary passed by in his car once a month, at most. A relationship most likely existed between the actual state of "deprivation" felt by the Dii, and a hope of a better future, based on the way the missionaries fought for the Dii, against the colonial administration and against the *lamido*. This situation must, however, be interpreted within an African setting where religion is a concept treated very differently from that of a Western intellectual perspective. The religious message of the missionaries was a holistic message that challenged not only the spiritual situation of the Dii, but also their material situation. It is therefore impossible to focus only on the material aspect, and ignore the spiritual aspect when analysing social change in a traditional African society. I have already argued that the Dii detected an ally in the missionaries, who could help them out of an unsatisfying political situation, and who brought with him interesting information that gave hope for a better spiritual and material future. The most important thing is, however, that all the actions and all the efforts made by the missionaries were interpreted by the Dii as religious actions that were related to the initial message of the Gospel, because all actions one way or another were interpreted within a religious cognitive framework.

### **Concluding Remarks**

McGuire reminds us that change itself is neither necessarily good or bad (McGuire 2002: 237). Social change refers to any alteration in the social arrangements experienced by a group or society. The main interest in this article has been to analyse the social changes that occurred when the

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<sup>32</sup> A question that is raised in most conference reports is the local teachers complaining about their low salaries, and the departure of teachers that left the mission for better paid government jobs.

Norwegian missionaries introduced the Dii-people in Northern Cameroon to Christianity. We have seen that this was an encounter where the Dii took an active part and employed to good purpose the alliance with the missionaries, by gaining increased political independence, by receiving western education and by strengthening their ethnic identity. Many questions about the transformation of the Dii society, about their spiritual reorientation and the development of ethnic identity, are yet to be answered.

I have, however, argued that the Dii were not merely passive "victims" of aggressive Protestant missionaries; they took an active part in forming their future in a period of considerable social change. The "religious breakthrough" initiated by the missionaries was used by the Dii to promote freedom of religion, and they were thus liberated to choose the road towards modernity that fitted them best, whether their focus was on the Christian or the Islamic religion or on the mainly secular western education.

The Dii myth of origin that introduced our theme, regardless of when it was created, states that the Dii descended from the mountain and left important traditions behind. They were forced to separate from the harmony and calm that reigned on the mountain, and they were introduced to the turbulent and complex world of modernity. In adapting to this New World, the Dii deliberately chose the missionaries as allies, with hopes that this would improve their spiritual and material situation. The dream of regaining a "paradise lost" was certainly abandoned, but the Dii made their encounter with Christianity an important encounter that formed, and continues to form the future of northern Cameroon.

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