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## Between Mosque and Palace

Defining identity through ritual practice in Ngaoundéré, Cameroon

*Entre la mosquée et le palace. Définir l'identité à travers les rituels à  
Ngaoundéré, Cameroun*

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# Between Mosque and Palace

## Defining Identity through Ritual Practice in Ngaoundéré, Cameroon

In 1804, a jihad was declared by Uthman dan Fodio, an Islamic scholar of Fulbe ethnicity, in what is now northwest Nigeria<sup>1</sup>. This jihad eventually established the Sokoto Caliphate, an Islamic state whose boundaries covered parts of contemporary northern Nigeria, northern Benin, southern Niger, northern Cameroon, southern Tchad, and western Central African Republic. The majority of this caliphate was based upon the formerly independent Hausa states of northern Nigeria which were largely conquered, thereby becoming emirates united under the ultimate power of dan Fodio. In the east, a large territory in what is now northern Cameroon was conquered by groups of formerly semi-nomadic Fulbe pastoralists, eventually constituting the largest emirate of the caliphate. This emirate thereafter became known as Adamawa, after its founding emir Modibo Adama, or alternately Fombina, “The South”.

The city of Ngaoundéré was founded sometime around 1835 by Ardo Hamman Ndjjobdi, a leader of the Vollarbe clan of Fulbe, as a regional capital of Adamawa emirate. The sub-emirate which Ardo Hamman Ndjjobdi founded is often referred to as a *lamidar*<sup>2</sup>. Ngaoundéré is located in the highlands

1. Thanks to Laamiido Mohammadou Hayatou Issa, the University of Ngaoundéré, and the people of Ngaoundéré for hosting me. Thanks to Virginia DeLancey for use of her images. This article has benefited from a DePaul University Research Council Paid Leave and a Visiting Scholar Appointment at Northwestern University. The material for this article was first presented in 2005 at the College Art Association 93<sup>rd</sup> Annual Conference in Atlanta, GA as part of the “Islamic Art and the Rest of the World, Part 1”, panel chaired by Oleg Grabar and Eva Hoffman.
2. The name of this particular ethnic group poses many problems for scholars in part because of their widespread settlement and in part because of the language, Fulfulde, itself. To treat the latter first, the term Fulbe is actually a plural term. The term for a single individual of this ethnicity is Pullo. Thus it technically makes little sense to refer to a Fulbe individual, which I nevertheless do for the sake of simplicity.  
The second major difficulty in dealing with nomenclature is that there are actually a wide variety of names that are used to refer to the Fulbe. These terms are usually versions of the Fulbe autonym, in either its singular or plural form, as interpreted through the languages of surrounding populations. Therefore, the terms used to refer popularly to the Fulbe depend on where and with whom they live. These terms include Fulani, Fula, Fellata, Peul, Haal-Pulaaren, and others.

of the Adamawa province of contemporary northern Cameroon. This area, prior to the founding of Ngaoundéré, was controlled by the indigenous Mboum population (Mohammadou 1978). After settling at Ngaoundéré, the Fulbe under the leadership of Ardo Ndjibdi entered into a more or less peaceful and mutually beneficial relationship with the more populous Mboum.

The exact nature of the relationship is unclear, with some, mostly earlier, sources suggesting that it amounted to a Fulbe aristocracy ruling over a servile Mboum population (Froelich 1959: 93-94; Mohammadou 1978: 276-280), while more recent research suggests that the Mboum were less equal partners in a state consisting of two major ethnic groups (Podlewski 1978: 109-110). In my own inquiries, the ethnicity of the raconteur seemed to be the primary factor: Fulbe inevitably recalled the heroic conquest of an intransigent Mboum population, while Mboum pointed to a peaceful strategic alliance between the two peoples. What is undeniable is that a melding of these two ethnic groups and cultures has occurred over time, producing a distinctive local identity that unites the population and that is embodied ritually through the office of the *laamiidô*, or emir<sup>3</sup>.

This article examines the rituals associated with Friday congregational prayer at Ngaoundéré, Cameroon, and the state council meeting, or *faada*, which immediately follows. It is based on the understanding that architectural forms are designed to structure ritual movement, and in turn gain meaning from this function. The two, ritual movement and the architecture which defines its physical context, must be considered inseparable in the formation of a meaningful whole. I view this ritual movement through the lens of Victor Turner's ideas regarding pilgrimage (1973) as well as his understanding of rituals as liminal practices (1987). I begin with a recounting of Friday prayer and *faada* that I witnessed on 29 September 2000, followed by a brief examination of the two architectural structures, mosque and palace, that bracket these rituals. I then suggest two possible interpretations of these rituals from Fulbe and Mboum perspectives. Most scholarly inquiries have investigated the differences between these two cultures. I contend that Friday prayer and *faada* serve to unite the differing cultures of the Fulbe and Mboum, as they also unite the architectural monuments most closely

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Fulbe is the autonym widely used by Eastern Fulbe groups, which would include the entire area being considered in this essay, and is therefore most appropriate from the standpoint of this author.

The orthography employed in this article follows the conventions established by UNESCO in Bamako in 1966 for the transliteration of Fulfulde terms. The "b" is an implosive "b" sound, while "d" denotes an implosive "d" sound.

3. *Laamiidô*, usually glossed as "emir", literally translates as "ruler". Until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the rulers of the *lamidats* of northern Cameroon were known by the less distinguished title of *ardo*. Simply meaning "leader", *ardo* is derived from semi-nomadic Fulbe culture in which the leader of a transhumant group would be referred to by this title. It is only in the twentieth century after the colonial conquest that rulers in northern Cameroon began to adopt the more prestigious title of *laamiidô* (DELANCEY 2012: 175).

identified with these two populations, thus giving a distinctly local interpretation for structures and practices that at first glance seem to simply reflect more widespread rituals of Islamic polities.

### Friday Prayer and *Faada*, 29 September 2000

I arrived at the square between the *laamiidô*'s palace and the central mosque at noon on 29 September 2000.

FIG. 1. — PUBLIC SQUARE BETWEEN THE PALACE (LEFT) AND MOSQUE (RIGHT).  
NGAOUNDÉRÉ, CAMEROON



(VIRGINIA H. DELANCEY, 2000)

It was Friday and I knew that a crowd would soon gather for Friday prayer, the only one at which all males able to do so are expected to attend at the mosque. Few, however, had gathered at this time. As I waited, an old voice came across the mosque's P. A. system. Crackling and humming with electrical current, the voice recited a passage from the *Qur'an* in Arabic and then began to explain it in Fulfulde to those who had arrived early.

As the *Qur'anic* exegesis continued, individuals began arriving one by one as well as with friends or relatives. Because the mosque was already full, newcomers lined up in rows outside of the mosque in the street that ran along its north side, eventually spreading out to the square between the palace and the mosque. All faced the *qibla*, or the direction of Mecca toward which Muslims turn for prayer. From Ngaoundéré, the *qibla* is roughly east northeast. As one o'clock approached, all of the surrounding roads and the square were filled to capacity.

Just before one o'clock, everything stopped. Silence prevailed and everybody waited. A man in red emerged from the palace entrance carrying a huge roll of mats and skins. He walked briskly to the door in the northern corner of the *qibla* wall of the mosque and entered. Soon after, the *laamiidō* himself exited beneath a large blue and white canopy held by a guard.

FIG. 2. — LAAMIIDŌ MOHAMMADOU HAYATOU ISSA EXITING THE PALACE TO PARTICIPATE IN FRIDAY PRAYERS AT THE ADJACENT CENTRAL MOSQUE. NGAOUNDÉRE, CAMEROON



(VIRGINIA H. DELANCEY, 2000)

Other guards preceded and followed him. The entourage approached the door in the *qibla* wall at a stately pace. The *laamiidō* entered the mosque after which the parasol was folded and placed next to a few spears left leaning against the mosque wall by the guards. As the ruler entered the mosque, the court “sorcerer”, an Mboum man, performed a series of rituals before the palace designed to protect it during the *laamiidō*’s absence. Minutes later, the Friday prayer began. The prayer rang out over the mosque’s P.A. system. Loud calls were followed by an old man’s voice quavering with devotion. The assembled worshipers responded to the prayer, performing the required motions. After only about ten minutes, it was all over. A number of middle-aged and elderly men began to strut around in robes, waiting for the weekly *faada*, or council meeting that follows Friday prayer, to begin.

At approximately 1:40 pm, the *laamiidō* emerged from the north entrance of the mosque. A cacophony of drums, oboes, and trumpets blared as the portly figure swathed in white robes appeared.

FIG. 3. — THE LAAMIIDO EMERGES FROM THE MOSQUE.  
NGAOUNDÉRE, CAMEROON



(VIRGINIA H. DELANCEY, 2000)

Immediately, the parasol opened to protect him from the sun. Servants surrounded him holding spears as several men with shiny trumpets of about three meters in length pushed out short bursts of notes directed at the *laamiido*'s head, employing their instruments to emulate the praise singing of a griot. The *laamiido* raised his hands and uttered a prayer after which he washed his face with his hands, beseeching God's mercy upon the community. After each prayer, he washed his face with his raised hands, an act repeated by other members of the community who were present, performing the Islamic prayer, or supplication to God, known as *du'a*.

Step by step, the *laamiido* approached the palace, slowly climbed the stairs to the palace entrance, and disappeared inside. The crowd, which had respectfully parted before him as he made his way to the palace, surged behind him and his servants. The *laamiido* walked through the entrance into the first courtyard. He continued his stately pace across the courtyard and into a large earthen structure with a high thatched roof known as Jawleeru Njakmukon, or "The Room of the Three Portals". Proceeding to the rear of the room, which functions as an audience hall as well as a distribution point within the greater architectural plan, he stopped before the large painted black field that covered the east wall. A servant quickly laid down carpets and skins upon which the *laamiido* seated himself with help from another servant. The trumpeters pushed their instruments through the entrance of Jawleeru Njakmukon; the sounds of their instruments echoed and reverberated through the room. A griot to the right of the entrance shouted

praises for the *laamiido* in a loud voice. It seemed like utter chaos outside in the courtyard, but all was perfectly organized inside the audience hall.

FIG. 4. — WHILE MUSICIANS PLAY IN THE COURTYARD, NOTABLES ENTER JAWEELERU NJAKMUKON TO PAY THEIR RESPECTS TO THE *LAAMIIDO*. NGAOUNDÉRE, CAMEROON



(VIRGINIA H. DELANCEY, 2000)

A line of nobles formed in the courtyard who then paraded into Jawleeru Njakmukon, stopping one by one before the *laamiido*. Each dropped to his knees to salute the *laamiido*, raising their swords in the air and shaking them. They all then sat down to either side of their ruler, forming a “V” shape with the *laamiido* at the apex. Occasionally the *laamiido* would wash his face, presumably having uttered a prayer, though none could actually hear it. The deafening music continued. The rest of the assembly washed their face performing *du’a*.

The *laamiido* motioned to his servant the *sarkin ‘ara*, who helps him dress before each event and guards him during performances. The tall, muscular man knelt before the *laamiido* receiving a message from him. Then the *sarkin ‘ara* stood and the music stopped. The silence was complete. The *sarkin ‘ara*’s voice rang out with the *laamiido*’s message: all assembled were to reassemble at 4:00 pm when the *laamiido* would reemerge to attend a celebration in the second courtyard of the palace. The music started again as the *laamiido* stood. The assembly as a whole then rose to their feet and saluted their ruler with raised arms and oaths of allegiance. The *laamiido* entered the private areas of the palace followed by

a servant who had gathered all of his carpets and skins. It was almost 2:00 pm and the crowd quickly dispersed to find food before the afternoon's activities began.

### Architectural Foci: The Palace and the Mosque

Having presented the events of Friday prayer and *faada* as I witnessed them, I now turn my attention to the buildings that bracket these rituals. The contemporary central mosque of Ngaoundéré is a large structure of reinforced concrete built in an international style that draws for inspiration upon Ottoman Imperial architecture filtered through the North African tradition, as evidenced by the large central dome and plan (see fig. 1). The plan consists of a rectangular prayer hall oriented perpendicular to the *qibla* and situated to the east of a large square courtyard surrounded by an arcade. The main entrance is on axis with and on the opposite side of the courtyard from the *mihrab*, with peripheral entrances on the north and south sides of the courtyard. A small portal in the north east corner is intended for the exclusive use of the *laamiido*, permitting him to take a position at the head of the congregation after all others have already arrived. This mosque was constructed in 1983 by French architect Armand Salomon and financed by Alhaji Abbo, a wealthy merchant from Ngaoundéré (Archnet).

The current edifice suggests little of its predecessor other than marking the same topographical location. The building replaced by the contemporary mosque was constructed by the French colonial regime, most likely in the 1950s, as a pitched roof structure with a minaret and a *mihrab* on the eastern façade. The construction of mosques by the French in Cameroon was not a case unique to Ngaoundéré. Cities across the north were provided places for Muslim worship by the regime in an attempt to appear as the gracious paternalistic power. These gestures were reinforced by such actions as annual presentations of *Qur'ans* to northern rulers by local administrators. Cities such as Tignère and Galim still use these colonial structures, though a wealthy local merchant was in the process of expanding the original Galim construction in 2000.

French sponsorship of mosque-building programs across the north may also have been undertaken in a mistaken belief that the mosque formed the conceptual center of the city. By the time the French arrived in Ngaoundéré, the city focused conceptually more on the relationship between population and palace than on mosque *per se* (DeLancey 2005). The French emphasis on the mosque is most likely derived from Orientalist conceptions of the Islamic City formulated in North African contexts, which have in themselves been shown to be quite problematic by more recent scholarship. The concept of the Islamic City, and of the centrality of the mosque as a primary element, were championed early on by William Marçais (1928: 86-100) and later by his brother Georges Marçais (1945: 517-533). As Nezar



AlSaiyad (1991: 17) describes their project, however, “They chose not to confront the issue of what constitutes the essence of Islamic urban existence and instead concentrated their attention on documenting the physical manifestations of that existence”. Shirine Hamadeh (1992: 241-259) points out the North African policy of the French, also enacted in Ngaoundéré, of separating, and thus objectifying and freezing in time, the Islamic “traditional” city from the European “modern” city.

The colonial mosque in turn had replaced the original mosque of Ngaoundéré, constructed when the area was settled by the Fulbe in the 1840s. In the absence of textual references or photographs, it is difficult to imagine the appearance of the original mosque. From the few photographs taken of 19<sup>th</sup> century mosques of the Sokoto Caliphate, we can assume that it originally appeared as a heavy rectilinear earthen structure surrounded by a low earthen wall (Moughtin 1985: 84-97; Dmochowski 1990: 2.1, 2.52). From the exterior, the mosque structure would loom over the low earthen walls, themselves broken only by the 3 or 4 entrance gates facing vaguely in the cardinal directions.

The mosque was, and still is, an area of restricted access. Only Muslims are permitted to pass within the confines of the mosque precinct. Prior to the 1950s, this restriction effectively limited access to the mosque to the Fulbe, as well as the smaller populations of coreligionists of other cultures, such as Hausa and Kanuri. The majority population of the *lamidat*, the Mboum, did not convert to Islam in significant numbers until the middle of the twentieth century (Podlewski 1978: 107). It is currently unclear, however, if the restriction of access to the mosque dates to the colonial era, resulting from French policies that produced strict distinctions between colonial and colonized spaces in this and other parts of the Islamic World, or from a pre-colonial era with origins in a deeper, more culturally-bound source. The latter seems likely considering the long term Fulbe use of Islam as a defining attribute of their cultural identity (Ver Eecke 1988: 310-322).

While discussing ritual topography, Victor Turner (1973: 207) broadly categorizes Islam, as opposed to ancestral cults and cults of the earth, as being characterized by rituals, “stressing the general good and inclusiveness...” He goes on to describe an expanded definition of community inherent in Islam and other universal religions, as opposed to the many more locally-defined religious beliefs common across Africa (*ibid.*: 207-208):

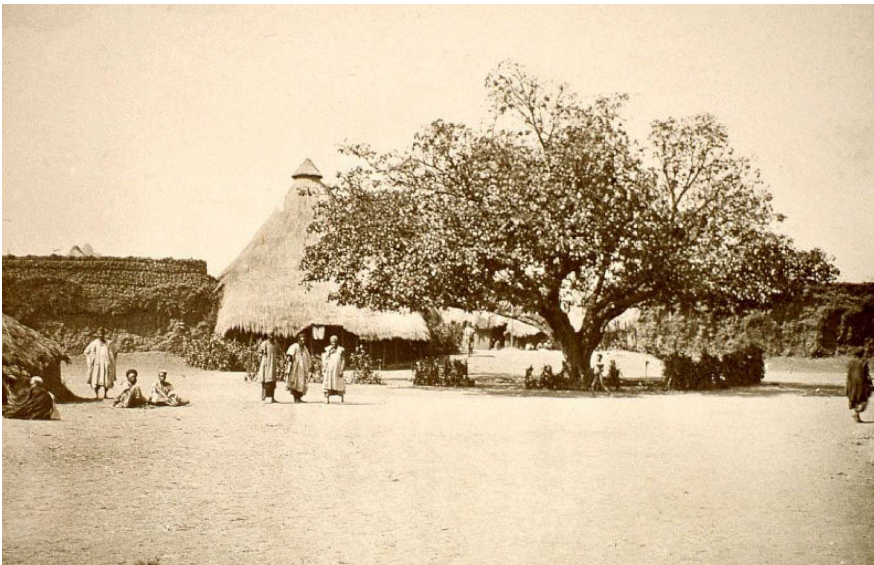
“[...] individual responsibility is now extended from the domain of immediate kin and neighborhood relations in localized normative systems to that of the generic human ‘brother’ and the ‘neighbor’ who might be anyone in the wide world but whom one should ‘love’. The ‘other’ becomes a ‘brother’; specific sibingship is extended to all who share a system of beliefs. Yet despite this shift, the polar distinction between cultural domains of exclusivity and inclusivity remains. The first domain is topographically and geographically expressed in the focusing of religious activity on localized shrines, situated in churches, synagogues, temples,

mosques, and meeting houses, which are themselves parts of bounded social fields and which may constitute units in hierarchical or segmentary politico-ritual structures.”

That is, while universal religions such as Islam express an expanded sense of community, local communities are still emphasized through local religious monuments. In the case of Ngaoundéré, the congregational mosque would represent the identity of the local Muslim community. For Turner, pilgrimage sites, such as the Ka’ba for example, represent a sense of greater belonging. Turner (*ibid.*: 219) later reminds one, however, that, “though pilgrimages strain, as it were, in the direction of universal *communitas*, they are still ultimately bounded by the structure of the religious systems within which they are generated and persist”. In other words, the sense of community enunciated by the congregational mosque of Ngaoundéré is proper only to the Muslim community.

After the mosque was established, the palace of the *laamiido* was built immediately to the west. A photo in an album from the Franco-German border commission of 1913 displays the remains of the original palace built by Ngaoundéré’s founder Ardo Njobdi.

FIG. 5. — PALACE OF ARDO NDJOBDI, NOW THE SITE OF THE GRAND MARCHÉ.  
NGAOUNDÉRÉ, CAMEROON. CA. 1835-1887



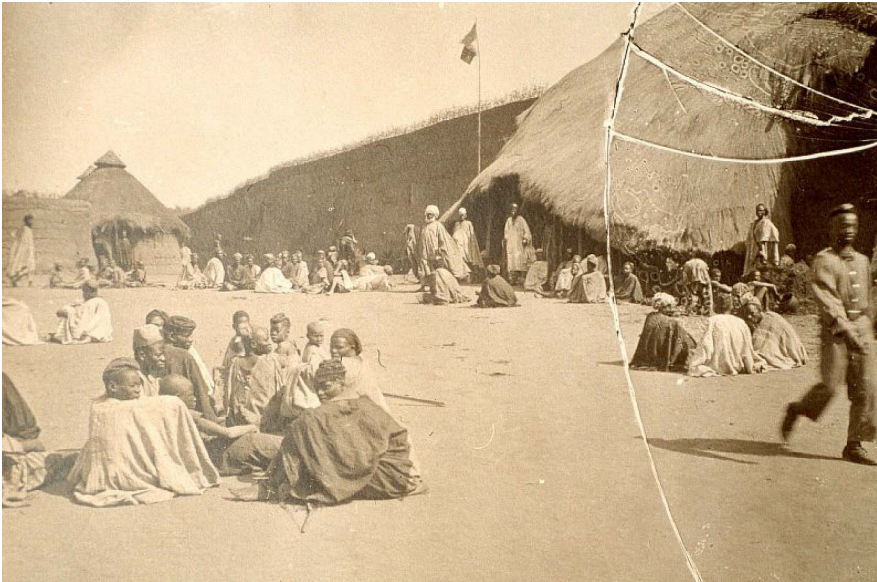
(“LA PLACE À NGAOUNDÉRÉ.” MISSION MOLL. 1905-1907. CONGO-CAMEROUN. ARCHIVES D’OUTRE MER, AIX-EN-PROVENCE, SÉRIES GÉO 8FI347)

A large area of this palace was enclosed within a high wall, pierced to the north by a tall, peaked entrance hall. It is uncertain, however, to what degree this photograph may reflect the original palace of Ardo Njobdi.

Ndjobdi's palace may have been destroyed during an attack by Ardo Hammadou Arnga Nya Mboula of Tibati in approximately 1858. Additionally, frequent repairs or revisions may have resulted by 1913 in a palace substantially different from Ndjobdi's. Ndjobdi's palace was later replaced in 1938 by a French-sponsored central market (Froelich 1954: 29). Nothing remains of Ardo Njobdi's palace save the large tree which stood before the entrance, to which he tethered his cattle when the city was first founded in approximately 1835.

The contemporary palace was constructed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century by Laamiido Mohammadou Abbo (r. 1887-1901) to the east of the mosque (Hansen 1999: 351). Although much larger in area, the contemporary palace resembled its predecessor from the exterior until 1993.

FIG. 6. — ORIGINAL ENTRANCE TO THE PALACE OF LAAMIIDO MOHAMMADOU ABBO, DESTROYED IN 1993. NGAOUNDÉRE, CAMEROON. CA. 1887-1901



("ENTRÉE DU TATA DU LAMIDO." MISSION MOLL. 1905-1907. CONGO-CAMEROUN. ARCHIVES D'OUTRE MER, AIX-EN-PROVENCE, SÉRIES GÉO 8FI347)

Ngaoundéré in the pre-colonial era was a fairly wealthy *lamidat*, particularly due to extensive slave raiding to the east and south, and was also fairly autonomous due to its location at the southeastern limits of the Sokoto Caliphate. Mohammadou Abbo was the first of Ngaoundéré's rulers to refuse to travel to Yola, the capital of the emirate, to receive official confirmation of his appointment. He sent tribute instead, paying lip service to the sovereignty of the emir of Yola (Mizon 1895: 69). The construction of a new palace at this time, complete with multiple sooros and high earthen walls,

emphasized the increasing wealth and independence of Ngaoundéré at this particular moment just prior to the German colonial conquest in 1901.

The entrance, from historical images and descriptions, was the largest architectural composition in Ngaoundéré when it was constructed, both in terms of area as well as in terms of height. It was a large, earthen hall with a ceiling supported on nine pillars, the whole covered with a tall, thatched roof. The entrance and each of the pillars were covered with painted earthen bas-reliefs. Porches extended in front and in back of the main hall, each covered with low-hanging thatched eaves. The entire composition stressed grandeur while also preserving an air of secrecy and privacy through the impenetrability of the opaque materials and deep shadows cast.

Unfortunately, the entrance hall burned in 1993, and was subsequently replaced with a cement structure that was financed, like the mosque facing it, by the wealthy merchant Alhaji Abbo<sup>4</sup>.

FIG. 7. — CONTEMPORARY ENTRANCE, BUILT IN 1993, TO THE PALACE OF LAAMIIDO MOHAMMADOU ABBO, NGAOUNDÉRE, CAMEROON. 1993 BY ALHAJI ABBO



(MARK D. DELANCEY, 2000)

In contrast to its predecessor, the contemporary entrance presents an image of palace architecture that is much more in keeping with contemporary government buildings, most of which are in fact relics of the French

4. On the shifting of the palace within the urban fabric, please see DELANCEY (2005: 3-21). On the arson of the entrance to the palace of Ngaoundéré, please see HANSEN (2000: 159-160).

colonial era (Hansen 1999: 357). It also creates a sense of visual unity with the mosque in its use of similar materials, forms, and colors.

This entrance is raised on a high plinth, accessed by a wide flight of stairs. A portico is set above the stairs with the central arch wider than the two arches on either side. The portico is surmounted by a pediment on which is emblazoned the name of the Lamidat. Behind the portico, the main hall is accessed by double doors flanked by two large windows to either side. The interior of the hall is a simple rectangular plan with two very slender columns to either side of the center as one passes through to the double doors opposite the entrance. This new entrance emphasizes associations with contemporary political power, the availability of the ruler, visual access, and modernity. All of these concepts are somewhat ironically belied by the peak of the tall thatched roof structure lying behind it which persists in peering over the roof of the entrance. The two represent the ironies and difficult issues facing a traditional ruler in contemporary society in northern Cameroon.

Like the mosque, access to the palace historically was restricted to particular populations. Only the ruler, his wives, his concubines, and the palace servants were allowed past the throne room into the private areas. Other than the ruler, these individuals were either female, and/or of Mboum ethnicity. Palace access was denied to male, Muslim Fulbe ostensibly for fear that they might usurp the throne. Furthermore, those who built the palace were largely of Mboum heritage. The official responsible for all construction within the palace, and for ruling in the *laamiido*'s place when he was either incapacitated or not present, is the *kaygama* Mboum. This title translates as "governor of the Mboum" and its possessor is the highest representative of the Mboum population of the *lamidat* at court. As the majority of the population allowed into the palace was Mboum, the language of the palace was predominately Mboum and all of its structures were, and still are, referred to by Mboum names. For instance, the name of the audience hall, *njakmukon*, is a compound Mboum term composed of *njak*, or "portal", and *mukon*, or "three". In essence, the palace represented the polar opposite of the mosque which lay just across a public square. While the population entering the mosque was restricted largely to Fulbe ethnicity of Muslim faith, those entering the palace were largely of Mboum ethnicity and of non-Muslim faith.

In Turner's earlier referenced division of religious faiths into those more universal as opposed to those more locally-defined, one may conceive of the palace as representing a belief system conforming to the latter category. In the African context, Turner (1973: 207) describes these belief systems as characterized by either "cults of the earth" and "fertility rituals retained in the control of indigenous priests", or as "ancestral cults" and "political rituals organized by political leaders of conquering invaders". The former category are more inclusive and enact on a local level the functions of the more universal religions, while the latter are more exclusive. Ironically, in the Ngaoundéré context, and I would argue across northern Cameroon

at the very least, Islam takes on much of the character of Turner's exclusive ancestral cults and political rituals organized by conquering invaders. The palace represents the fertility rituals of the Mboum referenced by Turner.

The ruler is himself a combination of the two communities. One of the requirements for mounting the throne is that the ruler be patrilineally descended from a Fulbe ruler of Ngaoundéré. At the same time, his mother must be Mboum, though in modern times this requirement has often been expanded to include any of the historically non-Muslim enslaved ethnicities incorporated into the *lamidat* (Hansen 2000: 96). In this manner, the *laamiido* embodies in his very being the original treaty between these two populations. If he denigrates the Fulbe, he denigrates his father's people. If he mistreats the Mboum, he mistreats his mother's people. All look up to him as their political leader and as the protector of their communities. In Turner's terms, the *laamiido* in many ways stands outside the bounds of the system set up by mosque and palace. As a representative of both, he is able to extend beyond the bounds defining each and bind them together into a coherent whole, occupying the intermediary void of the plaza.

### Islamic Connotations

From a Fulbe point of view, the arrangement of mosque and palace, and movement between the two, reflect a ritual repeated by rulers since the early Islamic period. At the same time that the *laamiido* is placed into a dramatic relationship with his own community, he is placed into a lineage which stretches back to the origins of Islam.

Architectural definition of the ruler's position in society is similarly based upon precedent. The direct connection between mosque and palace was made explicit in early Islamic communities, such as Kufa in contemporary southern Iraq, in which one was placed next to the other both for reasons of protecting the community treasury and for protecting the ruler by limiting his public exposure. This arrangement also emphasized the religious basis of political leadership. At Kufa, a door led from the governor's palace to an area just to one side of the *mihrab* of the mosque (AlSayyad 1991: 55-65; Djaït 1986). The return to the relationship of mosque and palace found in early Islamic centers such as Kufa is one element of a concerted program to conflate Fulbe history and identity with that of the wider world of Islam (DeLancey 2005: 15-17), represented in more recent times by the construction of mosques that partake in a more pan-Islamic architectural idiom.

Debates over Fulbe identity have been complex and center around attempting to identify a key group of traits called *pulaaku*, glossed usually as "Fulbeness" (Eguchi & Azarya 1993). *Pulaaku* is usually understood to include such qualities as reserve, generosity, kindness, bravery, herdsmanship, and endurance. The concept of *pulaaku* has interacted for centuries,

however, with the dictates of Islam. This is particularly striking in the context of sedentary Fulbe, although it is also quite true of nomadic populations. In fact, sedentary Fulbe often distinguish themselves from their nomadic brethren, perceived as uncouth and less trustworthy, as much through supposed adherence to the tenets of Islam as through permanent settlement (Ver Eecke 1988: 248-289, 1993: 139-61, 310-322; Hansen 2000: 103-110).

For Friday prayer, the *laamiidó* emerges from his palace at the appointed time to enter the mosque and perform his prayer. In doing so, he passes from a state of ritual impurity in his daily life to a state of ritual purity within the mosque. He also removes himself from the privacy of his palace, protected by a mazelike configuration of spaces, guards, and other devices, and unites with his people in a public arena for this brief period of time. The ruler emerges from his obscurity and the mystery, engendered by the 30 foot high walls around the palace, to publicly reveal his reverence, health, and humanity.

We might also characterize the ruler's experience in the mosque, in Turner's terms, as a liminal one. Turner, following the work of anthropologist van Gennep, characterized the visitation of pilgrimage shrines as rites of passage that could be broken down into three essential stages: separation, margin or limen, and reaggregation. The liminal stage constitutes a point at which the normal social order of the preliminal stage is overturned leading, in the pilgrimage context, to an imposition of a new state of *communitas* (Turner 1973: 213-214). *Communitas* is defined as, "a spontaneously generated relationship between leveled and equal total and individuated human beings, stripped of structural attributes..." (*ibid.*: 216). In the reaggregation stage, one returns to the point of origin a changed individual.

An important distinction of pilgrimage sites defined by Turner is that they be peripheral to normal life. They are normally located in isolated or out-of-the-way places that forces one to journey to them. The ritualized journey is important as it constitutes a crucial element of leaving behind the old social order. While one might argue that this factor negates the value of Turner's model for this essay, in fact, it further illuminates the discussion in two important ways. First, ritual and fanfare has in effect turned a weekly occurrence into a unique event heavily impregnated with meaning and repeated anew each time. It is as if the intensity of meaning has turned the short distance into a reference to a much longer journey. Second, the congregational mosque can be considered peripheral to the palace. As originally planned, the urban center of Ngaoundéré was the palace of the *laamiidó*, not the mosque (DeLancey 2005: 3). The struggle to maintain the centrality of the palace, or one might alternatively read this as the relevance of the position of the *laamiidó*, is an important contemporary issue in an era of multi-party politics and rapid urban growth. Thus, Turner's concept of the pilgrimage as an intentional journey to a peripheral location is conceptually applicable to the rituals of the *laamiidó* of Ngaoundéré's Friday prayer and *faada*.

One might argue that the Friday prayer in Ngaoundéré resembles a pilgrimage more closely in part due to the dictates of the Maliki school of law, followed throughout west and north Africa. Maliki law, in contrast for example to Hanafi law, emphasizes the need for the Muslim population to pray at a single location. Exceptions may be made, for example, for particularly large populations or natural features which make such a requirement impractical, but in general all are expected to congregate at the same mosque for Friday prayer. Thus the flood of people from around Ngaoundéré to attend the Friday prayer resembles the movements of masses of people toward a single location that typifies a pilgrimage.

The length of time that the *laamiido* spends in the mosque surpasses that of all others. He must exceed the community because his role is to represent it before God. A key qualification of a ruler in the Sokoto Caliphate is devotion. Lack of devotion is, at least theoretically, grounds for removal from office by the community (Hansen 2000: 114-115). Thus, at least the outward appearance of devotion through regular attendance and lengthy meditation at Friday prayer is essential to the position. The importance of this aspect of leadership was emphasized to me by the *laamiido* of Banyo who pointed out that he was one of the rare rulers who attended daily prayer at the congregational mosque, as opposed to a more ritualized presence at Friday Prayer. While this ruler clearly emphasized Islamic piety as a pillar of his right to rule, his practice likewise calls into question the degree to which older models of rulership enshrouded in secrecy and based in political control have given way to new models focused on visibility, the cult of the public persona, and a role as cultural and moral guardian (Warnier 1993: 303; Hansen 2000: 84-115).

During the celebrations attendant to the *laamiido*'s exiting of the mosque and returning to his palace, the people call out praises and pledge their allegiance to him. As the *laamiido* returns to the palace he retreats from the public sphere into seclusion. It is almost as if he takes holiness, if one can conceive of it as an objectified substance, from the mosque back to the palace with him; as if he had been spiritually "recharged" in the public sphere.

In fact, one might argue that holiness is frequently objectified as the objects or materials with which a pilgrim returns home from a shrine. More than just tourist tokens, these objects allow the pilgrim to return at will to the pilgrimage center. At times, a conscious effort is made not only to return with reminders of the pilgrimage, but indeed to recreate a sense of the pilgrimage center at home. It is in this sense that we can understand the introduction of a courtyard in the Sankore Mosque of Timbuktu with exactly the same dimensions as the Ka'ba as measured by the patron, Qadi al-Aqib, during the *hajj* in 1581 (Prussin 1986: 149). Closer to the focus of this study, the Kano Chronicle recounts the story of what brought the itinerant scholar and adviser to kings of the western Sudan Abd al-Rahman al-Maghili to Kano, Nigeria:



“There is a story that the Prophet appeared to Abdu Rahaman in a dream and said to him, ‘Get up and go west and establish Islam’. Abdu Rahaman got up and took a handful of soil of Medina, and put it in a cloth and brought it to Hausaland. Whenever he came to a town, he took a handful of the soil of the country and put it beside that of Medina. If they did not correspond he passed that town. So he journeyed until he came to Kano. And when he compared the soil of Kano with Medina soil they resembled one another and became as one soil. So he said, ‘This is the country that I saw in my dream’” (Palmer 1908: 77).

Thus, as with Turner’s concept of pilgrimage, Friday Prayer becomes in the Ngaoundéré context a means of extending a sense of the sacred from the religious center of the mosque.

During the transition between mosque and palace, in the physical void of the plaza, the *laamiidō* is also at the height of his symbolic uniting of the two, making the relationships between them palpable. One might regard the ruler at exactly this moment as defining the identity of Ngaoundéré to the fullest. In this sense, we can relate his almost tangible investment with meaning to the physicality of *communitas* commonly felt by pilgrims as described by Turner (1973: 218). The *laamiidō* is returning from the mosque wherein he has been brought back to the level of the rest of humanity, *i.e.* into a sense of *communitas*. He is entering into that stage which Turner would define as reaggregation in that he is returning to his palace a changed man. It is ironic, however, that his reaggregation results, in essence, in his seclusion in a new environment, that is in the palace. The virtual imprisonment of rulers in their palaces has been noted by art historian Suzanne Blier (1998: 28-29) as one of the central ironies of African kingship. The liminal state places the ruler in maximal contact with the population, while his reaggregation reimposes solitary confinement.

The people continue to show their support by following the *laamiidō* into his palace and pledging their allegiance to him. They do so not of their own power, however, but rather at the invitation of the ruler. As the *laamiidō* transgressed, both physically and spiritually, the liminal point of the palace entrance to approach the populace, so too does the populace cross the boundary of the palace walls when they approach the ruler in return. Just as the ruler brought the gift of his spiritual purity and his special connection with God to the population, the population also brings the gift of their continued support and honor to the *laamiidō*. They come to greet the ruler in his palace, penetrating its outer boundaries and entering into its mysteries.

### Mboum Perspectives

The Islamic rituals just described can also be reinterpreted through an Mboum lens that gives them a more specific meaning in the Ngaoundéré context. For example, the practice of *du’a* recreated, in Islamic terms, the blessing of the community with millet beer by the traditional Mboum ruler,

or *bellaka*, during the harvest festival known as *mborianha*. On the second day of this three-day festival, as described by the French colonial administrator Jean-Claude Froelich, the *bellaka* sprinkled millet beer over the assembled people and lands to promote fertility and success for both (Froelich 1959: 106). One is reminded here of Turner's broad grouping of locally-defined religious beliefs into those that emphasize ancestry as opposed to those that emphasize fertility. In this case, the *mborianha* ceremony focuses specifically on the fertility of the land and of the population.

Much like *faada* and the proclaiming of *du'a*, the *mborianha* ceremony took place almost exclusively inside or directly in front of the *bellaka*'s palace. In this ceremony, millet beer served as a medium of spiritual power. Millet beer serves this ritual role much as palm wine frequently does in areas to the south where the appropriate tree grows. Jean-Pierre Warnier has suggested reading the ruler in the Cameroon grasslands as a container, or a pot-king as he terms it, for life essence that may be shared in a variety of ways including by spitting palm wine over a ruler's subjects (Warnier 1993: 308, 2007: 25-30, 163-165). In the Mankon kingdom in the grasslands, the ruler as container is refilled annually through visitation of the graves of royal ancestors (*ibid.*: 2007: 205). This conception of the king is of particular interest as an instance of potential cultural continuity between the Cameroon grasslands and the Adamawa highlands. Continuities can perhaps also be seen architecturally in the tall peaked roofs defining circular forms above cube-shaped rooms that are characteristic of both of these regions. Indeed, many of the various populations now inhabiting the grasslands, excluding the Bali-Tchamba, ultimately trace their origins to the Mboum. The degree to which these populations are actually connected historically, however, is a debated topic in scholarly circles (Mohammadou 1990; Zeitlyn 1995: 99-104). Nevertheless, if one conceives of the *bellaka* along the same lines as the grasslands ruler, one obtains much the same conception as the Islamic ruler recharged with holiness in the mosque who entreats blessings upon the community from his privileged position.

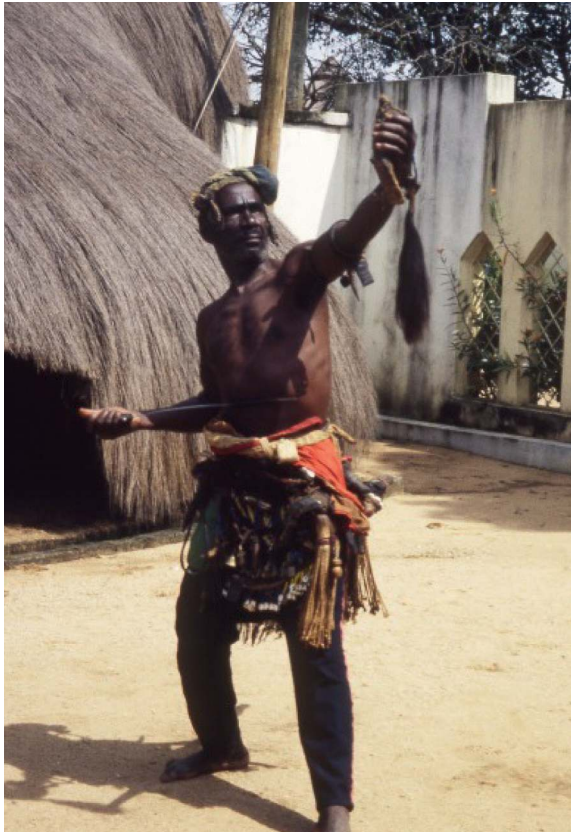
It is also clear that it was the *bellaka* who held a spiritual position between God and the population, much as seems to be the case with the *laamiido* of Ngaoundéré, and that his benedictions and prayers to God on behalf of his community were especially sought and appreciated. The *mborianha* ceremony became obsolete after the conversion of the *bellaka* to Islam in the 1950s. Purification with millet beer, or washing the face with blessings, illustrates the melding of different traditions in the Islamic context. Through the religious ritual of *du'a*, the *laamiido* represents the joining of the Fulbe and Mboum communities, and their leadership as one individual.

Another similarity between Mboum and Islamic ritual practice is the eastward direction of prayer. According to Froelich, prayer to the supreme deity in the Mboum religion was directed toward the east (Froelich 1959: 109). One assumes, considering the emphasis on fertility aforementioned, that this orientation focused on the empowering forces of the sun but this

has not been clarified through any known research. Similarly, the *qibla* from northern Cameroon is east-northeast. Thus, prayer in the mosque would echo that of the Mboum to the supreme deity. At Ngaoundéré, such prayer would furthermore be oriented in the direction of the palace, following its construction on the contemporary site in the late nineteenth century by Laamiidō Mohammadou Abbo. It is even possible that one of the primary reasons for relocating the palace to this specific location was to further draw together the population through ritual, particularly in the late nineteenth century when Ngaoundéré was asserting its local authority and therefore desirous of defining a stronger sense of local identity.

The continued viability of Mboum beliefs and traditions, despite the conquest of Islam, is further represented in the protection of the palace by the court “sorcerer”, or *boka*, while the *laamiidō* is at prayer.

FIG. 8. — THE *BOKA*, OR ROYAL “SORCERER”, POSES DRAMATICALLY FOR A PORTRAIT. DURING PROCESSIONS HE MAY FREQUENTLY DRAW A DAGGER ACROSS HIS TONGUE OR ABDOMEN, AS IN THIS IMAGE, TO SUGGEST HIS IMPERVIOUSNESS TO WEAPONS AND THE PROTECTION HE AFFORDS THE RULER, NGAOUNDÉRE, CAMEROON



(VIRGINIA H. DELANCEY, 2000)

The *boka*'s knowledge and power derive from an indigenous, non-Islamic Mboum tradition<sup>5</sup>. The spiritual forces which support the ruler, therefore, are of both Islamic and Mboum origin. One might speculate that the locus of each is graphically illustrated at exactly the moment when the "sorcerer" protects the palace while the ruler is in the mosque attending Friday prayer. That is, the power of the Fulbe and Islam is found in the mosque, while the power of the Mboum is found in the palace.

The cross-fertilization of the two is realized as the ruler leaves the mosque to return to his palace. As noted previously, it is at this point that in an Islamic Fulbe sense one can talk of reaggregation in Turner's terms. In Mboum terms, one can perceive a transferal of devotion from mosque to ruler. The assembled population have left the mosque and follow the ruler back to his palace receiving benedictions from him. They are invited into his palace wherein they are likewise reinvested with a larger sense of *communitas* that may not include the wider world of Islam, but does include the entirety of the population of Ngaoundéré.



The weekly journey taken by the *laamiidō* between the palace and the mosque represents an essential function of his position in society as a religious leader. This role is even more pronounced after the usurpation of his more secular roles by the colonial and independent governments. The *laamiidō* remains vital for the community in a ritual and moral sense. He represents the history of the state, its basis in Islamic tradition, and the unification of the Fulbe and Mboum cultures. This continued relevance is particularly true following the massive influx of emigrants from other parts of the country after completion of the Transcameroonian Railway in 1973, whose northern terminus is in Ngaoundéré.

What at first sight seems to be a ritual practice associated with congregational prayer common throughout the Islamic world, albeit with added fanfare, is given new meaning through local history, a multicultural environment,

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5. The term *boka* is of Hausa origin. According to G. P. BARGER (1934: 117) it may be defined as "A soothsayer; wizard; quack doctor". One assumes that the last definition displays an element of British prejudice. The term's common characterization as "sorcerer" might be taken to indicate the predominate pejorative Muslim as well as Western view of those who are versed in spiritual practices of indigenous origin, whether Hausa or Mboum as in the present case. Scholars have largely found themselves at a loss for an appropriate term, which has no pejorative connotations, to describe such individuals. J. JERSTAD and L. HOLTEDAHL (1994) interpret the term as "Minister of Magic", choosing to emphasize the official role of this individual in court ritual. The *boka* is recorded in this film while protecting the *laamiidō* as he exits the palace on horseback. The *boka* attempts to view the identities of sorcerers who might attack the ruler, while also protecting the *laamiidō*'s body from physical harm.

and the specific termini of the ritual. Although the ruler ostensibly must arrive at prayer at the appropriate moment, the grandeur of his entrance after the entire population has already assembled creates the illusion that prayer awaits the arrival of the *laamiido*. Thus, the effect of this grand ritual displacement of the *laamiido* is to shift the focus from the Friday prayer to the ruler's movement. This movement is inflected with meaning by the termini: the mosque, representing the hegemonic pastoral Fulbe Muslims, and the palace, representing the indigenous agricultural historically non-Muslim Mboum.

In fact, the deflection of primary focus to the *laamiido* is more than just a tactic to emphasize the ruler's grandeur in a generic sense. Instead, this focus becomes a tool emphasizing societal cohesiveness and integration of the two principle monuments of palace and mosque. It is the inflecting of the universalizing and exclusive Islam with a local Mboum religious experience to create a more inclusive whole. Turner's assignments of exclusive and inclusive are reassigned in the interest of creating a group identity that supersedes the boundaries, physical or social, of either.

Not only is attention deflected from Friday prayer to the *laamiido*, but also from the architecture which defines the ritual space. The endpoints of the pilgrimage become less important than the pilgrim and the act of pilgrimage. The architecture fades somewhat to become the fabric against which ritual plays out, only coming into focus when the *laamiido* vacates the space. There are moments in the ritual when this becomes possible, as when the ruler enters the mosque for prayer or when he reenters the palace after prayer. But it is truly only after the ritual is over, everyone has returned home, the dust has settled and noise quieted that one can return to focus exclusively on architecture.

Ritual and architecture, however, should never be considered as semiotically stagnant. Meanings of both shift over time and indeed with each enacting of the ritual. Relevant factors in the shifting meanings of the rituals of Friday prayer and *faada* include: the massive conversion of the Mboum population to Islam in the 1950s, the construction of the contemporary mosque in a pan-Islamic idiom, funded by a wealthy merchant who also funded the construction of the new entrance to the palace of *laamiido*, and the demographic surpassing of the Mboum and Fulbe population by other ethnic and cultural groups in the last three decades. In the contemporary period, however, the *laamiido*'s passage between palace and mosque every Friday continues to serve its primary function of representing the collective identity of the two most historically important populations of Ngaoundéré whose union has contributed to the emergence of a unique local culture.

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the relationship of architecture and ritual practice during Friday Prayer in the northern Cameroonian city of Ngaoundéré. Every Friday, the ruler of Ngaoundéré, a sub-emirate of the Sokoto Caliphate in contemporary Cameroon, makes his way at the appointed hour across the public square that lies before his palace to lead prayer in the central mosque. Following the prayer, the ruler returns to the palace surrounded by great fanfare and pageantry after which he receives the assembled nobility for a council meeting. The mosque and the palace which physically bracket these weekly ceremonies represent the principal populations of Ngaoundéré—the formerly nomadic, pastoral, Muslim Fulbe and the sedentary, agricultural, non-Muslim Mboum. The connection of mosque to palace through ritual reflects the role of the ruler as unifier of the populations represented by these monuments, and as the fulcrum for the construction of a unique local identity.

## RÉSUMÉ

*Entre la mosquée et le palais. Définir l'identité à travers les rituels à Ngaoundéré, Cameroun.* — Cet article examine la relation entre l'architecture et la pratique rituelle pendant la prière du vendredi dans la ville nord-camerounaise de Ngaoundéré. Chaque vendredi, le souverain de Ngaoundéré, un sous-émirat du califat de Sokoto dans le Cameroun contemporain, traverse à l'heure dite la place publique qui se trouve devant son palais pour diriger la prière dans la mosquée centrale. Après la prière, le souverain retourne au palais entouré de la fanfare et de l'apparat, puis reçoit les notables réunis pour une réunion du conseil. La mosquée et le palais qui encadrent physiquement ces cérémonies hebdomadaires représentent les principales populations de Ngaoundéré — les ex-nomades, les pasteurs, les musulmans fulbe et les sédentaires, agricoles, non musulmans mboum. Le lien de la mosquée au palais, à travers le rituel, reflète le rôle du souverain comme consolidateur des populations représentées par ces monuments, et comme point d'appui pour la construction d'une identité locale unique.

Keywords/Mots-clés: Cameroon, Fulbe, Mboum, architecture, Islam, mosque, palace/ Cameroun, Foulbé, Mboum, architecture, islam, mosquée, palais.