

Review Article

The Oral Traditions of Warr and Tang Clan's Ancestry in Mbum land, North West Region of Cameroon

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Abstract: In Cameroonian societies like elsewhere in Africa, people narrate their history of origin linked to myths and legends. The people of Warr and Tang clans of Mbum ethnic group have specific sites where they migrated before settling on the Nkambe Plateau. This study examines the path history holds from scientific investigations where the Warr and Tang clans originated. From historical findings, the clans migrated at different epochs from Kimi in the present-day Adamawa Region of Cameroon. While on the plateau, the Warr myth holds that, they emerged from a water pool and first settled at Mbiribo before establishing secondary settlements. The Tang on their part hold strongly to their legend of the striped field mouse that gave them the idea on how to cross River Kofatar and it subsequently led them to Talla, and conversely they separated to established different settlement sites. The study demonstrates how myths and legends contribute to historical construction, by pointing out the real meaning inbuilt in myths and legends, which are used metaphorically. In historical appraisal, this paper argues that myths and legends constitute an integrated factor in communities co-existing and reconstruction of history.

Keywords: Myth, Legend, Ancestry, Warr, Tang, Mbum, Mbiribo, Mbanjeng

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INTRODUCTION

In the construction of African history, historians have depended on the use of oral traditions (myths, legends, songs, and folklores) as a valuable source of information. Tasie, argues that the history of the people is largely oral and preserved in the memory of living persons mostly elders, cultic functionaries, and other custodians of cultural and religious traditions and passed on by word of mouth from generation to generation.¹ Oral tradition constitutes the main source of ancient African history as people vividly narrated events that occurred in the past. Myths, legends songs, folktales and poetry demonstrate elements of historic facts, which give information of events. These oral renditions were the resources that the first Christian and Moslem scholars used to document historic events. The use of myths and legends in the writing of history has been a cause of disagreement among historians as issues of exaggerations, bias, distortions of events always play a toll on the narrative especially when it comes to the history of the victor and vanquish. Despite this handicap, in the context of African historiography,

myths and legends remain a valuable source of information in the construction of the people's history.

Mbum history of migration and ancestry have been written using oral traditions as the memories of the past are embedded in the myths, legends, and songs of people that depict historic events. Against this background, the type of approach adopted in oral historiography, for collecting useful data for the systematic study of Mbum migratory and settlement history can be derived through myths and legends. The Study of Mbum history now tends to depend more on secondary sources which seem unaware of the vast potentials of oral materials like myth and legend. This paper posits the argument that the Mbum like other ethnic groups in Bamenda Grasslands especially Kom traces and justifies their migratory and settlement history through myth. The myth and legend have vast potentials of information that is important and more justifiable source in understanding and reconstructing Mbum migratory history.

Understanding Myth and Legend in Mbum Historiography

Scholars, more precisely historians, literary and cultural pundits, have viewed the concepts of myths and legends differently. A myth is regarded as a true account of the remote and immediate past. Myths as

¹ G.I.K. Tasie, The Heritage of the Mouth: Oral Sources and the Study of African Traditional Religion in International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention, Vol.2 Issue 3, March 2013, p. 26.

traditions of the people are not invented; they are experienced and constitute aspects of orally transmitted tradition among various peoples of the world and form part of peoples' history.² Myths are stories, which deal with, and interpret the relations between the natural and the supernatural and are concerned with parts of religious life that lies beyond the moral order.³ Afigbo, in turn, considers myths as having the "tendency to explain historical institutions and development by appeal to non-historic factors and forces" as stories that see "the supernatural acting at times through the agency of man, at times through the agency of the lower animals and other times even through the agency of inanimate object, as the original and continuing causes of motion in a society."⁴

In studying the origins of most ethnic groups in Cameroon and Africa, myths and legends have largely been used as a potential source of information. They are widely accepted by various historians who trace the traditions and origins of the people. The myth and legend of Warr and Tang clans are highly considered as having huge historical accounts since they contain numerous aspects of past events. Many scholars have relied on this myth and legend to provide insight into their respective pursuits and understanding of Warr and Tang clan's origin, migration, and settlement.

Warr and Tang constitute part of the three clans, which made up Mbum group. The Warr clan consists of Binshua, Bongom, Chup, Nkambe, Kungi, Njap, Njirong, Bihnjeng, Ntumbaw, Nwangri, Mbaah, Mbot, Saah, Sop and Wat fondoms respectively. Its headquarters is at Mbot; the first place where they settled under their leader Bomsa.⁵ The Tang clan with its headquarters at Talla comprises the fondoms of Bih, Binka, Kup, Ngarum, Ntundip, Sinna, Taku, Tabenken, and Talla. These clans together with the Ya migrated from Kimi in present-day Adamawa Region of Cameroon to the Nkambe plateau in three different directions in about the second half of the seventeenth century.⁶ Coincidentally these groups settled in the same geographical region. While on the Nkambe plateau, the Mbum evolved the same cultural, social, and political institutions. The Mbum speak and understand a common language, Limbum. However, the Warr and Tang, have a separate account of their origin, migration, and settlement on the Nkambe plateau.

²U. M. Nwankwo, *The Position of Oral Tradition (Myths, Mythology and Legends) in Historical Records in 2012 International Conference on Humanity, History and Society IPEDR vol.34*. IACSIT Press, Singapore, 2012, p.60.

³J. Vansina, *Oral Tradition*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1965, p. 157.

⁴S.A. Shokpeka, "Myth in the Context of African Traditional Histories: Can it be called "Applied History"?" in *History in Africa*, Volume 32, Cambridge University Press, p.486.

⁵T. Ngarka, *The Wimum People of Donga Mantung Before the Coming of Europeans*, Buea: Star Link Communications, 1998, p.13.

⁶Ibid. p.16.

Warr Clan Myth of Origin

There exist two versions as revealed in the oral traditions of Warr origin and migration. One is a myth, which states that they originated from a pond while the other points to Kimi as their ancestral home. The custodians who are notables charge with the duties of narrating Warr traditions of origin believe in their myth and hold strongly to it. The myth is attached to a geographical feature that is a pond. Warr people claim they originated from this pond at Mbiribo (place of pumpkins), the first settlement area. The area was named Mbiribo because of the abundant pumpkins (not the eatable pumpkin fruit of human beings but that of chameleons) that grew there due to the abundant water from the pond.⁷ Mbiribo is very significant as it was the gravesite of Bomsa, the Warr ancestral ruler that is located closer to the pond. This place was equally the first location of the Mbot *Fon's* palace but it was later moved by *Fon* Njah to the hilltop, present-day upper Mbot.

The Warr people held strong to their belief because their ancestors are known to have come from Mbiribo. They are believed to have emerged from the pond and started living there before spreading to other parts on the Nkambe plateau. The first ancestors according to this myth knew no other place of origin but Mbiribo. This is only true concerning fondoms that their leaders left from Mbiribo before establishing permanent settlements elsewhere on the plateau and beyond like Bum in Boyo Division.⁸ Mbum scholars argue that Warr like Tang and Ya groups migrated and settled on the plateau at different times. However, the Warr myth cannot be easily discarded, as there is an element of historic facts attached to it. Warr is translated in Limbum as "scattering" and it was used as a proper noun to refer to the people who were scattered all over Nkambe plateau and beyond.⁹

According to the Ya version of Warr origin, their place of origin is not known nor the time when they came to the Nkambe plateau. Nevertheless, what is certain is that they first came in contact with them when they were attacked by the Bali-Kumbat slave raiders.¹⁰ Due to the attacks, the Warr fled into the bushes and some took refuge in Wowo that was close to Ya while the Bali-Kumbat camped in their land. Ya argues that the raiders, while in their camps in Warr land had eaten pumpkins, and when they left; the seeds sprouted and bore pumpkins, which served as fruits to them and the Warr.¹¹ When the Bali-Kumbat warriors left the area definitely, the pumpkin seeds later grew in large quantity and the place became known as Mbiribo.

⁷Tata Simon Ngenge, personal communication, July, 2018.

⁸M. D. W. Jeffreys, *The Wiya Tribe*, Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1963, p.45.

⁹Molar Cornelius, personal communication, July 20, 2018.

¹⁰Jeffreys, *The Wiya Tribe*, p.45.

¹¹Ibid.

The Warr genesis of creation does not accept this assertion. But no account has been given as concerns the introduction of pumpkin seeds in Mbiribo to justify the Ya claim. Equally, the pumpkin is the type eaten by chameleons and not human beings. What is certain about the Ya version of Warr origin is that they met them on the plateau. According to the Warr, they originated from nowhere except Mbiribo. They affirmed that other Mbum clans came and met them on the Nkambe plateau.¹² The Warr diaspora groups found out of the Mbum land like Bum, Chanti, Bem, Mbat, Djottin, Nkol, Nkar, and Sop equally share the view that they originated from Mbiribo before migrating to their present sites.¹³ Apart from that, there are further contradictions among Warr fondoms as concerns their origin. While Chup, Nsop and Ntumbaw fondoms assert that Mbiribo was the secondary center of their dispersal and separation from Ntem, those of Mbot, Nkambe, Njap, and Binshua together with Warr diaspora groups have no tradition of origin beyond Mbiribo.¹⁴ The claim of those Warr fondoms that Mbiribo was their place of origin further buttressed the fact that the Warr were the aborigines of the plateau and Mbiribo was their origin and point of dispersal.¹⁵

What gives strength to the Warr myth of origin is the fact that the Tang and Ya groups that arrived later to the region met the Warr as a settled group of people with well-defined socio-political and economic institutions.¹⁶ F.W. Carpenter equally held that the Warr were the aborigines of the plateau and had spent two or three centuries in the area before the coming of the other groups.¹⁷ However, he was unable to prove that they migrated from elsewhere since he based his assumptions on comparing the genealogical tables of the Warr, Tang, and Ya *Fons* that had reigned during that period. This myth remains alive and subject to debate, since there is no historical record and oral traditions on any group of people known to have settled on the plateau before the Warr. The significance of the pond further buttresses the Warr myth. The Warr people believed in the medicinal property of water derived from the pond in the treatment of people with speech deficiency and barren women.¹⁸

¹²J. T. K. Mangoh, "The Wimbun of the North West Province of Cameroon c. 1700-1961," B.A Dissertation in History, University of Ilorin, 1986, p. 24.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴E.M. Chilver, and P. M. Kaberry, *Traditional Bamenda The Pre-Colonial History and Ethnography of the Bamenda Grassfields*. Buea, Government Printers, 1967, p. 27.

¹⁵F. Y. Nfor, and P. Samari, *The Cost of Disunity (The Mbum of the Nkambe Plateau)*, Bamenda, Yu Tarr Productions, 1997, p. 5.

¹⁶ Chilver, and Kaberry, *Traditional Bamenda*, p. 28.

¹⁷S. Y. Nforba, "Fondom Relations among the Mbum of the Nkambe Plateau from c.1780 to 2002," PhD Thesis in History, The University of Yaounde I, 2016, p. 44.

¹⁸E.K. Ngala, "The Wimbun From Origin into Statehood 1600-1900: Myth or Reality?," D.E.A Dissertation in History. The University of Yaounde I, 2008, p.62.

The claims in Warr mythology demonstrate that they originated from Mbiribo and this has helped in the reconstruction of their history. The myth is very important in their history of origin as it reveals the geographical place of Mbiribo that became the point of convergence, the capital, the center of ancestral libations, purification and sacrificial stronghold of the clan. The contradictory view of Warr origin became a point of concern to the early British administrators in Mbum land and many other researchers in determining Warr origin by not relying on their myth but by employing other scientific methods. In the reconstruction of the history of African societies, their myths cannot be separated from their history of origins. The Warr clan, just like the Igbo in Nigeria has different myths and versions of origin. There are many accounts, which explains the origin of Igbo but the most authentic oral tradition, which describes Igbo origin, is the Nri myth.

According to Nri version, the ancestor of the Igbo, Eri, descended from the sky and sailed down River Anambra. When he arrived at Aguleri, he met some autochthonous group of people who had no living memory of their own and settled with them. As their population increased, some groups migrated to other parts of Igbo land to establish their settlements.¹⁹

The myths of the people play a vital role in providing facts on the group origin, migration as they demonstrate and depict places that are feasible and traceable on maps.

Tang Clan legend of Migration

Tang does not have a myth of origin like Warr but they have a legend about their migration. The Tang claimed Kimi as the land of their forefathers. Their migration history revealed that they left Kimi and first settled at Ntem.²⁰ The word *Tang* in Limbum literarily means count. It was used to refer to what happened at River Kofatar when people died in their numbers in an attempt to cross the river during the night.²¹ Tang is also used as a prefix to refer to the different fondoms of the clan like Tang-Taku, Tang-Talla, Tang-Ntundip, Tang-mukeng (Tabenken).²²

Oral traditions and historical documents confirmed that Tang clan originated from Kimi. It was the constant pressure of the early Chamba raids that

¹⁹ AMB Abdulrazaq O Hamzat, "The Mystery of Igbo Origin" <https://thewillnigeria.com/news/the-mystery-of-igbo-origin/>, 2013, retrieved on November 20, 2019.

²⁰ N. Ghiantar, *The History of Taku People From 1400-2010*, Bamenda, Peaceberg Printers, 2012, p.2.

²¹ Nfor, and Samari, *The Cost of Disunity (The Mbum of the Nkambe Plateau)*, p. 6.

²² Ngarka, *The Wimbun People of Donga Mantung Before the Coming of Europeans*, pp.13-14.

caused them to move from one place to another in search of a peaceful settlement area.²³ From Kimi, the Tang settled at Ngu in Ntem in the Upper Mairin valley for a period of about three or four generations. They could not establish a permanent settlement in Ngu due to the pressure from the Chamba raiders who were in search of slaves to send to the Hausa land in Nigeria. The constant pressure necessitated further movement of the Tang from the region. They left Ntem via Nkut, passing through Nsop and finally settled at Mbajeng also referred to as Bamala.²⁴

The Tang settlement at Mbajeng was short-lived. Two main reasons had been attributed to the further migration. The first reason had to do with the terror and panic created by Chamba raiders. Oral tradition holds that it was the news of a planned raid by the Chamba on the people that forced them to migrate. The second account attributed their migration to a dispute between Nkum and Nyar over the sale of a house servant. Nkum was deceived by his brother that the daughter who was given to him as a house servant had died, when she was exchanged for food and a grave dug with a plantain stem buried in it to represent the girl.²⁵ When Nkum realized the trick behind his missing daughter, it provoked a conflict between them which caused their separation and movement from Mbajeng. Nyar could not also stay behind and decided to migrate with his group.

A more convincing reason for the migration of the Tang was the news of the planned raids. It is debatable that the dispute between Nkum and Nyar could not have been responsible for the migration of the whole group. If not for the terror of the Chamba raids, Nyar could have possibly stayed there with his group. Conversely, the Tang clan decided to leave Mbajeng the night of the planned raid. In the course of their escape, they were ignorant about the nature of the terrain to their destination, which was made up of hills, valleys, and rivers. It suddenly occurred that the Tang was faced with the River Kofatar to cross (Kofatar literally means, "take and give to the father." in Limbum). It was a fast-flowing river with high velocity. Since it was in the night and they had no knowledge of the existence of the river, some people fell in the river that had overflowed its banks as they attempted to cross it. Tang people died while attempting to cross the river and the rest were saved by a drummer who managed to transmit a warning message by the sound of his drum beatings to the people of the impending danger.²⁶ On getting the message, those who were left spent the night along the riverbank until the following day.

The Tang legend holds that the survivors were stranded along the riverbank and it was difficult for them to cross the river. However, they could only cross the river following an example shown to them by the striped field mouse (*kie* in Limbum) which suddenly appeared from the bush and acted as a guide. The striped field mouse had crossed the river on an elephant grass stalk back and forth several times under the watchful eyes of the survivors. It finally crossed and remained on the other side of the riverbank. The gesture of the field mouse gave Tang the idea of constructing a bridge across the river. Thus, they cut a tree using traditional axes and cutlasses across the river, which served as a bridge for them to cross to the other side of the river.²⁷ Like the field mouse, the Tang crossed on the tree to the other side of the river. They paid a lot of tribute to the rat that had given them the idea of the tree, which served as a bridge. From that moment, Tang started honouring the rat as a god-sent saviour to rescue the people.

Immediately they crossed the river, the survivors were counted and a stone monument was raised at Mbajeng called *mtur-witang* in remembrance of those who died in the river.²⁸ Each stone represented a person that had drowned. However, the exact number of the people can hardly be said with precision due to the passage of time and the failure of man's memory. It has equally been difficult to get the exact number of stones that formed the mound to approximate the number of people because of grazing activities and erosion that had caused the displacement of the stones.

The journey of the Tang did not end at Mbajeng after the construction of the stone monument. They continued their movement up the hilly plateau. The migratory legend further held that the rat reappeared and started moving from the census place where the stone monument was constructed. They followed the direction of the striped mouse since it had given them the idea on how to cross the river, they believe the rat was a path-finder.²⁹ Some kilometers away, the Nyar family stopped following the rat and took a different route towards the direction of Nso. However, the Nkum family continued following the rat. When the striped mouse got tired and rested, they too patiently stopped.³⁰ They made several stops at Bup, Ntangri, Sinna until they reached where the rat entered in a hole that is believed to have been dug by another rat. The Nkum family group sat patiently by the hole waiting for the rat to come out and lead them to the

²³ P.N. Nkwi, and J. P. Warnier, *Elements for a History of the Western Grassfields*, Publication of the Department of Sociology: University of Yaounde, 1982, p.152.

²⁴ Mangoh, "The Wimbun of the North West Province of Cameroon, p.40.

²⁵ Ghiantar, *The History of Taku People*, p.2.

²⁶ Aloysius Nteh, personal communication, April 10, 2012.

²⁷ Ngarka, *The Wimbun People of Donga Mantung Before the Coming of Europeans*, p. 12.

²⁸ S.Y. Nforba, "Fondom Relations among the Mbun of the Nkambe Plateau from c.1780 to 2002," PhD Thesis in History, The University of Yaounde I, 2016, p. 50.

²⁹ Ghiantar, *The History of Taku People*, p.2.

³⁰ *Ibid.* p.4.

subsequent journey and onward destination. Unfortunately for the Tang group, the rat did not come out from the hole. The Tang regarded this gesture as a terminal point of the journey and their path-finder wanted them to settle. Conversely, they did not move further but settled there.

The legend maintains that after a short period, the Tang discovered dry grass at the mouth of the rat's hole and they decided to follow the example of the rat and made thatched huts for their dwellings.³¹ As a tribute to the rat, it became unlawful for the Tang to hunt it for food. They continued to guard the rat's house like a palace ensuring its safety from any natural or human attack in its honour. The fact is that the Tang left Mbajeng and moved to the upper part of the slope in search of a settlement area and finally settled at Talla. They did not follow the striped mouse as it could not have waited for the remaining Tang to finish counting their lost relations as the legend holds before leading them to Talla. The Tang legend corroborates that of Kom as they are believed to have been led by a python from the Ndop plains to Laikom. The Tang legend also corroborates that of Yoruba origin which is traced to Oke Oramfe, in Ile-Ife of Osun State, Nigeria.

According to the legend, there was a period when the world was covered by water. The Almighty God then decided to send some of his messengers to the world and they included Obatala or Orisa Nla or Orisa Alase [as the leader] and sixteen Oye [immortals]. They were given five pieces of iron, a lump of earth tied to a white piece of cloth, and a cockerel. Somewhere on their way to the world, the leader, Obatala, got drunk with palm wine. Oduduwa seized the symbol of authority from him and eventually led the party to the world. The site on which they landed is traditionally known as Oke Oramfe in Ile-Ife. On arrival at the site, Oduduwa set down the five pieces of iron and placed the lump of earth on them. The cockerel then spread its toes on the earth. Consequently, the earth was formed and Oduduwa thus became the ruler. It was from this base (Ife) that he extended his authorities to other Yoruba towns and villages.³²

This legend depicts that the foundation of Yoruba kingdom started with Oduduwa. Oduduwa is believed to be the first leader that led the Yoruba to Ile-Ife and subsequently sent his sons and grandsons to found other Yoruba kingdoms.³³ This legend does not

reconcile the fact that the Yoruba originally came from the North-Eastern area of Africa. The Tang settled at Talla but had to disintegrate following the death of their leader Nfor Bfunjeh. When he died, Yewoh was enthroned as the new leader to the dissatisfaction of the other brothers. They left and settled elsewhere on the Nkambe plateau and established different settlements. The fondoms of Taku, Kup, Sinna, and Talla were the main fondoms founded by the direct descendants of Nfor Bfunjeh. The fondoms paid allegiance to the *Fon* of Talla as their clan head because he was the eldest brother of the Tang. Other Tang fondoms found in Mbum land were the direct offshoots of the four main fondoms. They also looked upon the *Fon* of Talla as their clan head. Some of the Tang group separated at Mbajeng and did not settle on the Nkambe plateau. They moved further to settle in the Nso land. The Mbamsong, Mbam, and Nsih people who are referred to as *Do* were part of the Tang that settled in Nso.³⁴

CONCLUSION

Myths and legends play a vital role in the history of any group. The early histories of Greece, Rome, China were reconstructed following oral tradition using myths, legends, and folktales. This is not an exception for those of African societies like the Igbo, Yoruba, Kom, Warr, and Tang groups. This study has examined the place of myth and legend in the historiography of Warr origin and Tang migration and settlement. It has demonstrated that these oral traditions were a valuable source of information in writing the history of these groups. The history of origin, migration, and settlement of these groups are better narrated and understood using myth and legend. The myth and legend reveal feasible geographical places and features like the pond at Mbiribo, river Kofatar, and the stone monument at Mbajeng that gives authenticity to the historic events as depicted in the myth and legend of the Warr and Tang groups. They have been of vital importance as researchers have used them in ascertaining their origin and tracing their migratory routes from Kimi. To give a clear-cut conclusion on the debate about the Warr origin, a more practical scientific method like deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) should be used to trace the Warr ancestry from Adamawa region of Cameroon.

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³¹ Sarah Ntalah, personal communication, July 20, 2018.

³² AMB Abdulrazaq O Hamzat, "The Mystery of Igbo Origin" <https://thewillnigeria.com/news/the-mystery-of-igbo-origin/2013>, retrieved on November 20, 2019.

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³⁴ N. P. Mzeka, *The Core Culture of Nso*, Jerome Radin Co., Agawam, 1980, p. 11.

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