

Living a Kulango Life:

Examples of Socialization under the Shadow of the *Laasagyo*

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The Kulango of Nassian, a Gur people living mainly in the North-Eastern territory of modern Ivory Coast, with a few villages scattered along the border in Ghana, are sedentary horticulturalists, whose relationships with the plant-kingdom they live in, share many characteristics with those typical of the Abron-Akan groups, but also of some Gur/Voltaic communities they live in contact with. Aim of this paper is to provide some examples of how these bi-dimensional cultural influences melted together giving life to the present day Kulango cultural identity.

The discussion is divided into three different parts.

Paragraph 2. contains an overview of the two most important ceremonial events of the Kulango agricultural calendar: a) the typically Akan yam feast and b) the typically Gur pearl-millet feast.

In paragraph 3. the focus moves towards the peculiar role of a tree, which the Kulango call the *laasagyo* and of two other vegetal elements which are still very important in the modern Kulango social world: a) palm wine, or *taja* in Kulango, and b) the kola nut, or *pɛsɛ* in Kulango.

Paragraph 4. will be devoted to an ethnolinguistic study of the conceptualizations of what is a plant and what is a mushroom according to the Kulango Weltanschauung.

1. Introduction¹

The Kulango of Nassian are matrilineal (Micheli 2006a) sedentary horticulturalists speaking a Gur language² and living in the North-Eastern territory of Ivory Coast. According to Ethnologue, considering together the two dialectal variants of Bondoukou and Bouna³, the total Kulango population counts about 145.000 people and the language is classified at EGIDS level 5⁴. The language is usually

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² Niger-Congo–Atlantic-Congo–Volta-Congo–North–Gur•Kulango;

cf Ethnologue online www.ethnologue.com/subgroups/kulango

³ As discussed in Micheli 2007, the two variants are mutually comprehensible.

⁴ www.ethnologue.com/cloud/kzc “EGIDS 5 - The language is in vigorous use, with literature in a standardized form being used by some though this is not yet widespread or sustainable”.

transmitted to the younger generation and it is commonly used in all daily exchanges and activities, except for formal situations, such as at school or at the court, when people switch to French.

The Kulango of Nassian traditionally live on yam, which represents at least the 70% of their diet. Other products are manioc, millet (only in the north-eastern territories), and a few other garden products (tomatoes, plantaines, gombo, chili-pepper and the like). Fruits (ananas, mangoes, sweet bananas) are cultivated only in the south-eastern regions close to the Akan territory, but they do not represent any attraction for the Kulango and are mainly used as goods to be sold at the market.

The region of Nassian can be considered as a kind of a buffer zone in which the Voltaic tradition of savannah peoples, like the Dagari of the Bouna kingdom (Boutillier 1993), or their cousins the Mosi and the Senoufo, intertwines with the Gold cultures of Akan descent, such as the Abron of the Gyaman kingdom (today the village of Tanda), or their close relatives, the Agny and the Bawlé (Micheli 2012).

Due to this peculiar geographical position and to the pressures exerted respectively by the two kingdoms, the Dagara of Bouna and the Abron of the Gyaman (Terray 1995), the Kulango of Nassian have developed a complex cultural identity, mixing in some ways values and practices of the two worlds they have always lived in contact with.

As we will see in a while, this cultural code mixing is quite evident also with respect to the Kulangos' relationships with the plants and the plant-kingdom.

In particular, evidences of this are to be found in the agricultural calendar, in some specific rituals, like the celebrations of births, funerals and marriages, but also in daily activities and in the practices and systems of taxonomic classifications of traditional healers. In the next paragraphs some of these cases will be illustrated in detail.

2. *Dəŋmədiḡə* and *kokogodiḡə*, the yearly agricultural calendar

Since the second half of the 20th century, scholars agree that West Africa can be easily divided into three main different agricultural areas: the eastern region, where agriculture is based on roots and tubers, the western zone, based on upland rice, and the northern savannah where sorghum and millet are the main crops (Coursey and Coursey 1971).

According to recent archaeo-botanic investigations, the domestication of pearl millet in the regions south of the Sahara, specifically in Mauritania and/or Mali could date back to the third millennium BC (Füller et al. 2007). For agricultural peoples living in the savannah regions, having millet as their major staple food and the custom of ritually celebrate new millet crops in their yearly calendar must thus be considered as old as their own history.

At the same time, the southern, forestal regions of West Africa characterized by a long rainy season and prosperous fertile lands, are instead homeland of root crops, such as the so-called yellow yam (mainly *Dioscorea rotundata* and *Dioscorea cayenensis*), which, according to Kay and Gooding 1987, seems to have been domesticated for the first time in a region corresponding to the present Ivory Coast.

The area inhabited by Kulango speaking peoples finds itself at the junction between the two ecological domains. It is thus not a surprise to see that, according to their agricultural habits and specific habitats, they can roughly be divided into two culturally distinct groups, which correspond to the two ancient kingdoms of Bouna and of the Gyaman.

According to oral traditions, Bouna was founded by the mythical hero Bunkani, of Dagari descent around the 13th/14th century when the gold mines close to the Ghanaian town of Begho were still productive (Füller et al. 2007), while the kingdom of Gyaman was founded at the end of the 18th century by an Abron noble family running away from the civil riots which followed the collapse of the Ashanti empire (Terray 1995; Micheli 2012).

The two different agricultural domains are characterized by a different agricultural calendar, ritually marked by different celebrations.

While, in fact, in the kingdom of Gyaman and surrounding villages the agricultural year is ritually “opened” by the Gyamanhene during the so-called *dəŋmədiŋə*⁵ feast in the first days of October, in the chefferies of Bouna and surrounding territories, the main agricultural celebration, the *kokogodiŋə* corresponds to the early *kokogo* (pearl millet)⁶ harvest, which happens in August, in a period corresponding to the peak of the rainy season.

Both ceremonies aim at fixing the cosmical equilibrium between the forces of the Chaos and this world, and they do so through the annual renewal of the ritual pact with Earth. In Bouna this task is performed by the *saakə tɛsɛ*, or the Earth priest, while in Tanda it is performed by the *Gyamanhɛnɛ*⁷, or the king of Gyaman. After a ritual purification of the new millet or the new yams respectively, the *saakə tɛsɛ* and the *Gyamanhɛnɛ* and their families are the first persons who can eat a meal made with the crops just harvested. Only after that this ritual meal has taken place, all villagers are allowed to

⁵ The *dəŋmədiŋə* feast follows a ritual schema very close to that of the Ashanti *Odwira*, as described by Rattray 1923 and 1927.

⁶ *Kokogo* is the term used for “pearl millet” in the Kulango dialect of Nassian. The word is very different from the common *mar(d)a** root used both in Mande and Gur languages of the region. There is anyway a form *koko*, attested in Ghana, which refers to a specifically fermented porridge obtained by pearl millet (cf Rao et al. 1985). Unfortunately I do not know if the same word *kokogo* is also used in the Kulango dialect of Bouna.

⁷ Of course *-hɛnɛ* is a loan from the Akan *hene* “king”.

eat millet or yam for the rest of the year without running any risk in terms of possible mystic attacks by invisible forces.

During the same feasts, other collective rituals are celebrated, mainly involving the ancestors.

The village of Nassian, which is today a préfecture representing the institutional centre of circa 60 villages, due to its peculiar position right at the junction between the two Kulango groups above described, from the point of view of its agricultural calendar and food habits seems to be quite a hybrid entity. It seems in fact not so strange, in some villages of the region, to have the possibility to attend both feasts, the *dəŋmədiŋə* and the *kokogodiŋə*, which can be equally celebrated.

The fact that in any case higher prestige is universally recognized to yam rather than to pearl millet, can be considered as a symptom of the higher prestige still reserved in the region to the Akan cultural tradition.

3. *Laasagyo*, *tarja*, and *pɛsɛvãŋə* or *pɛsɛvurjo*

The social life of a Kulango village revolves around a very big and most of the times leafy tree, which is planted at the very centre of the market square: the *laasagyo*.

With the term *laasagyo*, the Kulango do not indicate a specific botanical species, but rather a social institution. Characteristics of the *laasagyo* are: a) that it is the eldest and the biggest tree of the village, and b) that it is placed at the centre of the market square, which represents the heart of the village. The *laasagyo* is usually a mango tree, but sometimes it can also be a bread-tree or even a baobab.

At every time of the day, under the shadow of the *laasagyo* it is possible to find the village elders and family leaders sitting together and discussing more or less important questions concerning their community and sharing a good calabash of fermented palm wine.

On official occasions, when it is necessary to discuss serious matters or to judge on facts of witchcraft, theft, illnesses or serious menaces for the crops and the like, the *laasagyo* becomes the seat of the court. The shadow of the *laasagyo* is the most important public institution, and as a consequence it is the typical place reserved to males exerting their public functions.

After sunset, when people are back from their fields and mamas are preparing food for their families, the *laasagyo* becomes something similar to the stage of our theaters. The village elders and family leaders are now grandfathers, the children gather at their feet and listen to them telling stories or traditional tales. In this way the forefathers' values are transmitted to the new generations and the sense of group identity is strengthened.

The *laasagyo* corresponds to what in other regions of the ex-French colonies in West Africa, for example in the Akan-Anyi-Bawlé territories of Ivory Coast, is called the *arbre-à-palabre*.

In Nassian and in surrounding villages, all the male occasional gatherings, all community official meetings held in the shadow of the *laasagyo*, as well as all ritual ceremonies which involve a form of public socialization, are characterized by the sharing of many liters of *taja*, the palm wine, a slightly alcoholic beverage obtained from the sap of a small palm tree typical of the forestal areas.

The same beverage is widely diffused all around forestal West Africa and is generally called *bangui*. The sap is usually extracted from the palm tree making an incision in its bark. From each tree it is usually possible to obtain from two to three liters of the precious liquid, which sometimes is diluted in water. The process of fermentation is very quick. Until four or five hours from extraction, people say that the *taja* is too sweet and too light and therefore suitable only to women, but after 18 hours or the like it becomes so acid that it is impossible, also for men, to drink it.

For these reason *taja* cannot be stored. When a specific ritual feast is coming, and a large amount of public is expected, men organize themselves in collectors' teams and go looking for the sap just a few hours before the meeting or the ceremony takes place.

The *taja* can also be distilled, but at present this practice is very rare. The result of the distillation of the *taja* is a very alcoholic beverage, called the *kutuku*, which only old men usually drink at the very end of public meetings, just to close the feast *comme il faut*.

The drinking of the *taja* requires the observance of the same set of traditional norms typical of the Akan culture. The beverage is stored in a large common calabash and people sit in circles according to their gender. Serving the *taja* is a task performed by the youngest boy (or the youngest girl respectively) in each circle. The boy (or the girl) collects some of the *taja* in a small pear-like calabash - so that it is easier to hold it by its "handle" - and offers it to the people composing the circle, starting from the eldest person. Participants to the *taja* ritual drinking, in turn, take a single sip directly from the boy's calabash and leave the rest for the others to drink. Each refilling of the small drinking calabash must complete the entire circle, in order to make evident that nobody is excluded from the ritual sharing of the *taja*. This highly ritualized drinking includes also the ancestors. Each drinker in fact, before taking his own sip, pours some drops of the precious liquid on the ground, in order to give some refreshment also to his/her forefathers and to allow them to take part into the event.

In the northern territories of the Kulango region in Ivory Coast, where millet is more common than yam and the forest becomes dry savannah, the mostly used alcoholic beverage during public meetings is millet bier⁸.

Another fruit typical of the forestal regions of West Africa, the kola nut, *pɛsɛ* in Kulango, is worthy of special attention. Kola is considered a real prestige good in West Africa, and, at least since the Middle age, it has been commercialized even in some territories of Southern Sahara, hundreds of km north of its production zone (Lovejoy 1980).

According to Lovejoy 1980, in West Africa there are four main species of kola: *C. nitida*, *C. acuminata*, *C. verticillata*, *C. anomala*. The species *Cola Nitida* is the one cultivated in the Akan forestal regions and it is by large the most common variety in the North-South exchanges between Southern Sahara and the forestal areas.

On the basis of their color and of the market on which different types of kola nuts are usually sold, the Kulango of Nassian distinguish five different species: *pɛsɛvãɔ* (red kola)⁹, *pɛsɛvurɔ* (white kola), *pɛsɛkyene* (grey Kola), *pɛsɛwaga* (kola destined to Ouagadougou?) and *pɛsɛnam* (not transparent). Unfortunately I did not have the possibility to precisely identify the correspondence of these names to the scientific taxonomy.

Being used as a prestige good in many ritual exchanges, such as for example the payment of the bride price by the family of the husband to the family of the wife in quite all the matrilineal societies of Ivory Coast, Ghana, Togo, Benin and Nigeria, the kola nuts seem to lose their ritual charge when they reach their northernmost destinations, where they are sold on the market principally for their nutritional and medical properties.

According to Lovejoy 1980: 98, kola nuts

contain, together with other compounds, large amounts of caffeine, and smaller quantities of theobromine, kolatin, and glucose. All these are stimulants (...). When chewed, and it appears that Kola was not cooked or made into drinks anywhere in Africa, the nuts have an effect similar to that of coffee, tea or cocoa, and consequently kola, being an excellent refreshment, can be used to relieve hunger, thirst, and fatigue, lending itself well to social situations. It had a ready market almost everywhere in West Africa: in the savanna, where demand was high in the absence of tea, coffee or other preparations, filling

⁸ Unfortunately, I do not know the name for this beverage in Kulango; the Kulango of Nassian use the French loan *bière*, but interestingly enough they have a specific name, *frɔkɔ*, for the tree whose bark is used to flavor the millet bier.

⁹ The Kulango form *pɛsɛ* corresponds perfectly to the forms used in the production areas of Ivory coast, such as *bɛsɛ-va* (Abidji), *bɛsɛ* (Akan, Twi, Ashanti), *wɛsɛ* (Anyi). According to Lovejoy 1980 Kola production in the Akan forests was already very common in the 15th or maybe even 14th century.

such roles, and tended to increase with the spread of Islam and its prohibitions on alcoholic beverages (...).

Despite the presence of mosques in quite every village of the region¹⁰, the Kulango of Nassian still use kola nuts principally as a prestige good in ritual exchanges, rather than as a refreshment food, while it seems that the reverse is true for their Kulango cousins living in the northerner areas beyond Bouna.

This fact, again, places the community of Nassian closer to the Akan forestal world rather than to the Gur savannah people.

4. An Ethnolinguistic perspective on the Kulango conceptualizations of two vegetal elements: medical plants and mushrooms

When we think of the plant-kingdom according to our own Weltanschauung, we think of something separate from the animal, human, and/or supernatural kingdom.

This, however, does not happen in many traditional cultures in Africa, where trees, plants, and herbs seem to have the possibility, in specific moments, to share at least part of the characteristics with humans or animals.

Trying to explain what is a vegetal element and which characteristics allow “something” to be considered a vegetal element in the world vision of a Kulango of Nassian is not an easy task.

In this case, a discipline like ethnolinguistics, with its special attention devoted to the use of specific words and taxa, can help in disambiguating some basic ideas.

First of all, according to the Kulango, as it is common to many other African cultures, vegetal elements, such as plants, trees, and herbs are generally not conceived as being lively things.

Lively things, like animals and human beings, share in fact the characteristics of having a) at least a soul (*māyɔ* in Kulango) and b) a living, mobile shadow, which is taxonomically distinguished from the immobile shadow of objects.

In Kulango these two different types of shadow are respectively called the *dūūlio* (living/animate) and the *bogoton* (not living/inanimate)¹¹.

¹⁰ Bondoukou with its more than 30 mosques was considered the most Islamic of the Northern towns.

¹¹ The same terminological distinction for animate and inanimate shadow is common in many languages of West Africa, in Bambara (Mande) there is the couple *dya/suma* and in Bawle (Tano-Kwa) there is the distinction *wawé/fɔvɔ*. In both languages the shadow of vegetal elements is inanimate.

When I discussed the issue of the nature of plants and medical herbs with Djedwa Yao Kuman, the eldest traditional healer of Nassian in 2006 (Micheli 2011), he explained to me that, in his own way of thinking, plants, trees and herbs are generally inanimate, but explaining their status is a quite more complicate problem. Like animate beings in fact, every plant, tree or herb, can host the universe agency-force, called the *kp̄ãȳ* in Kulango. The *kp̄ãȳ* is exactly the supernatural power which allows the plant to become a medicine and to heal the patient. It is in fact to this “power”, or “essence”, that the healer addresses his prayers and offers his gifts (a kola nut, an egg or the like), when collecting a medical plant. Only if the *kp̄ãȳ* accepts the healer’s gifts and decides to lend him its power, the medicine results effective and the patient recovers.

All vegetal elements which potentially could host this *kp̄ãȳ* are called *dεεk̄* in Kulango, while those elements which are useless for sure, such as weed, are called *zεzεm*.

A special place in (or better out of) this system is reserved to mushrooms, *p̄iũ* in Kulango.

Due to their functions, mushrooms are in fact regarded as something ambiguous. In the preparation of food they usually substitute meat and can therefore be assimilated to animals / living beings, while their use in the preparation of medicine places them in the plant-kingdom. Interestingly enough the same species can alternatively be used in the one or in the other way, and therefore the very same mushroom (*p̄uŋo*) can alternatively be classified as an animal or as a vegetal element.

5. Conclusions

In this paper I have made an attempt to show how some elements of the plant-kingdom can be useful in the reconstruction of socio-cultural relationships among two communities living in close connection with each other at the fringes of two different ecological and cultural niches. The Kulango of Ivory Coast could be divided into two different cultural groups, where the northern communities around the town of Bouna share cultural elements with the Gur people of the savannah regions, while those living close to Tanda, in the ex-kingdom of the Gyaman are much more similar to the peoples sharing the Akan gold civilization.

If we leave aside this rough division, and try to keep our eyes right on the border between the two zones, we notice that there is a village with its surroundings, which shares some peculiarities of one world as well as some characteristics of the other, and in which the same language, Kulango (a Gur language) is spoken: the village of Nassian.

Looking at their habits, we can see how the present day Kulangos of Nassian have developed a culture which is in itself a mixture of traits deriving both from the savannah and the forest peoples.

This is a good example of how a border zone can become a fertile area where the main feature is not conflict, but a fruitful melting of different traditions which can peacefully generate a new cultural identity.

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USDA (United States Department of Agriculture) 2014. *PEARL MILLET Pennisetum glaucum (L.) R. Br. Plant*
Symbo=PEGL2. Plant Guide.

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