

BIMBIA

AS

I SAW IT

BY

AUNTIE CLARA YONDO TAMA

Introduction

Bimbia is a community consisting of three villages' namely Dikolo, Bona Ngombe and Bona Bille. Bimbia is situated at the East coast of the Limbe Sub Division. I will like to bring to memory the Bimbia of the thirties in which I was born. By their location, the Bimbia man is a born fisherman as I remember in my younger days, Bimbia used to be. I was born in 1932 when the population of Bimbia was about 2500 people.

Bimbia was the first place a Whiteman set foot on the Cameroon shore in 1858, when the English Baptist missionaries led by Rev Alfred Saker landed. There he built the first school and first church. Later he came to Victoria where he built the Ebenezer Baptist church. Our great grandfathers used to tell us how they attended Saker's church and school. I am proud to say that the Bimbia man was the first person to go to school and the first to become Christians.

The three villages were very thickly populated and when something happened in one village there was communication by drum to the other villages and the others came to find out what was wrong and if it was a call for an emergency it was quickly handled.

Personality

The Bimbia man is a very receptive person. Anyone who came to Bimbia received a warm reception. The Batangas, from Kribi came to Bimbia to fish and after staying for some time with their families were given a beach of their own between Bona Ngombe and Bona Bille and the beach was called "*Livo la Vatanga*" meaning Batanga beach. There was also a police barracks at that time. Today, Mbofi houses a CRTV station.

How chop farm became a village

Chop farm or 'Mbofi' as the native called it was started by a few people from Bamenda who when they found out that the soil was very fertile started sending for their family whose descendants are still there. Mbofi had a Presbyterian church with a resident evangelist. There are Mbofi children who are in high positions in Cameroon. The population was mostly Meta and most of their children went to school in Victoria. There were no proper roads at the time but the children braved it on foot to and fro. There are still families in Mbofi who are descendants of the people who were the first settlers.

ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES

Fishing and Farming

In the thirties the fishing industry was something to be proud of. They did their fishing by communal labour as it was not possible for one man to be able to set up his fishing equipment. Therefore the men of the village came together and made the equipment of one person then went to the other.

The Bimbia man fished in many different ways namely: *Ndemba*, *Ngoto*, *Mbunja*, *Efese* and *Moleke*. *Ndemba* was the most difficult method which needed the men of the village to help one another. The men of the village had to cut down some tall mangrove sticks which were planted in the sea as a fence, and then they put the *ndemba* inside the fence. The *ndemba* was made out of cane with a large mouth and narrow button.

There also was the '*isenge*', which was made in the same shape with an opening on one side to enable easy removal from the *ndemba* after the catch and then put it back into the *ndemba* for the next catch. The main fish which was caught by the *ndemba* was, '*meyo*' what the non natives call "*munyanya*', but the *ndemba* caught other species of fish in smaller quantities. This was done during the dry season as the *meyo* had to be dried by sun and fire to bring it to '*benyanya*'.

During the *Ndemba* fishing period the women were very busy. First they had to cook large quantities of food for the men who went to cut the *matanda* and went to fit the *ndemba* in the *matanda* fences. This process took place from one family to the other until all the families had been served. The *ndemba* seasons last about three months before other methods of fishing are done. The *ngoto* which is used for catching shrimps and what is generally known as '*mwanjamoto*' is then done. Also the '*efese*' is used to catch other fish for the season.

There is also the '*moleke*' with which a man does not need to enter into a canoe but can only sit on the stones on the beach and throw his line into the sea and make a catch. The '*bunja*' too is also used at this season until the dry season comes again to use the *ndemba* which has been dismantled and kept on dry land.

The women dried all the fish, sold it and gave the money to their husbands. The smaller fishes were given to the women to sell or batter for household needs. The women were also yam planters. If a woman planted 200 yams she was termed lazy. Some women planted as much as 5-700 yams. At that time people used to come from all over to buy *benyanya*, smoked *njanga*, smoked *mwanjamoto* and other fish. Women came from chop farm with raw food to exchange for fish and brought things like *accra* banana, groundnuts and *koki* beans which our mothers batter with fish.

During the dry season when our fathers went to sea in the night, we remained behind, kept part of our evening meal to eat with roasted fish at about 1-2 am. And from that 2 am, we worked until morning on the *efese* to sort out the fish in their different spices. We put the different fishes in very big baskets we called '*ndenge*' and started drying them on the '*wokas*'. *Woka* is a stab made of bamboos from the palm tree. It was not easy for our mothers as they had to dry the fish in the sun and carry the *wokas* to the '*etaka*' or *bandas* where a log fire was made to smoke the fish at night. The *benyanya* dried was stored away to give way for other fish to be dried also. When the season for *meyo* was over, the season for *mwanjamoto* and crayfish (*njanga*) started.

Our mothers worked through out the years as they were responsible for the drying of the fish at all the season. In my days we did not have crayfish which was not properly treated in the market, because our mothers took time to blow out the crayfish with a basket made in the form of trays we called '*ngova*' and left it clean before it was sold. Today when we buy crayfish it is all *njanja* dust because the profit both the fishermen and the buyers want to make. Today *Mabeta* is the only crayfish market we have and the Nigerians who now do the fishing have no time for such treatment as our mothers used to do to make the crayfish clean. Most of the fishing methods are not used now especially the '*ndemba*' which Nigerian fishermen do not know. Our mothers were from the sale of fish responsible for looking after of all the house needs such as soap, oil, salt, kerosene etc. Our fathers were responsible for the sale of the big '*benyanyas*' to pay our way through school. We had six quarters in *Dikolo* namely, *Mbeng'a Liwoka*, *Bali*, *Wona Wonanya Wona Ngowe* and *Wona Mbimbi* and *Mabetefutu* with their family heads and a traditional chief. Our *Bimbia* chieftaincy stool dose not rotates. It is in the same family for all generations. In *Dikolo* the

Ekum'a Makundu family have the chieftaincy and it is not contested for. In Bona Ngombe it is the Musuka family who have it. In Bona Bille it is the Billa Lozenge family who have it, the descendants of king William of Bimbila.

Market days – Tedious time

On market days the cock was the women's clock. They would prepare their market baskets with whatever fish they had to sell in the market. At the second crow they had a signal which told everyone that it was time to move. They all took their lanterns which they kept at a spot in the grass when day was breaking and they could see.

Our roads were narrow paths with grass on both side of the road so the women put on some old dresses and carried a presentable dress to wear before they entered Victoria. When they got to the Manga bridge, they put down their baskets, went down to the water's edge, washed their faces and their feet and came up to wear their fine dresses before going to the market.

After the market, they waited for each other and started for home with whatever they bought from the market. Their first stop was after "Motondo", a place we called 'Watchman', where the Germans built a house for their field assistant who at that time were senior staffs of the plantation. The place has a stream which is now filled with big rocks and little water. After resting for sometime they took off again to the next resting place which was Mbofi. At Mbofi they rested for sometime, then left and got to Mbamba where the Germans had the first printing press whose remnants can still be seen today. There was also a house that housed the day watch for the palms which were there as the natives came to pick up the fallen nuts of what was known as American Banga (nuts). There, they would eat whatever they bought from the market to sustain them.

The next stop was after the Mabeta-Dikolo junction where there was a Bassa taper they called "Bonga head" because he was fond of asking for the heads of bongas to cook for his dogs. Finally they left there to Dikolo. It was really a tedious life for our mothers but they never complained because they were born into it.

Some Bimbila history

Ekum'a Makundu who was my great grand uncle - Dikolo Chief told us that it was when Saker came with his Christian religion they stopped their slave trading. He told us stories of how they caught some none natives and sold them as slaves to the Spanish ships that came to Bimbila but never landed because they were afraid of the natives whom they termed "savages". He also told us how he used to be a pirate and fought the Spanish people and took away their properties. The Spanish people got furious and decided to bomb Dikolo - Bimbila. When the information reached the indigenes, they were advised to put very long poles with white pieces of materials tied on them along the beach. When the Spaniards came they were surprised to see the peace signal; some indigenes went to the sea to meet them and make a peace pact and promised never to worry them again.

SOCIAL ACTIVITIES

Christian life

Owing to our Christian background, almost the whole of Bimbia people were choristers. In fact, the whole community of the three villages were choristers. Each village had its own choir then there was a joint choir of all three villages which was called Ding'a David; a choir which won first place in all competition around and could sing the famous hallelujah chorus in Duala. My father Karl Ekum'a Njoh was one of the choirmaster's and composer. One did not consider him or herself too old to be a choirmaster. In fact most of them died as choristers which were a pride for them.

TRADITION

Our tradition is dead because our children of today do not know it because many of them were born and bred outside the village; where they had no opportunity to know it.

i) Marriage

When a Youngman reached the age to marry a wife, his parents were responsible for giving him a wife. They will look for a girl from a family they regarded as a good family. They then went to the girl's parents to propose marriage. The girl was then consulted, if she liked the boy, the marriage went ahead. It was either in church, native law and custom or by kidnapping. If a family could not afford to do anything big, the two families agreed on a kidnapping.

A female elderly woman from the girl's family would be asked to get ready on the given day. She would lure the girl, say, to the stream or to the farm where the boy's family waited to ambush her. As soon as they entered with her to her proposed husband's house, the elderly woman would move up to her and pinched her. This implied that you cannot go back anymore to your father's house, and so automatically you became a bride. The bride stayed home for about two months before been allowed to start going out and performing her domestic activities.

ii) Birth

On delivery of your first child, the village midwife came and took control of everything like shaping the head of the child and teaching the girl how to handle the baby when breastfeeding. After a month or so, the mother and baby were now brought out and 'born house' party will take place.

iii) Death:

If someone died, the family would come together to make arrangement for the burial which was usually in two days time. If the family had an in-law, that family too shared in the funeral expenses. If the person was a '*konja*' '*a jengu*' dance took place the previous evening before burial the next day and Christian rites observed.

After the person had been buried for three days, there was a three day ceremony we called '*evinja songo*'. This ceremony was purely and only a man's affair. The young men who dug the grave were given plantains and chickens to prepare pepper soup with. This meal was not shared to a woman. After this, they drank some 'afofo' and palm wine to end the ceremony.

Also after burial of the person, some women slept in the house of the deceased for eight nights and on the morning of the ninth day, the bed on which the deceased slept was dismantled. A nine day ceremony which was called '*Liwuka*' was held. Animals like pigs and goats were slaughtered and that was the end of the compulsory ceremony. If the family wanted to conduct a thanksgiving service or a memorial service, they did so sometime after. This was done even after any number of month or years.

iv) **Widowhood:**

When a husband died, the widow was given an old dress to wear, and then she slept on the floor with a mattress made of dry plantain leaves. Then a family member who is also a widow will be at her side. The woman is termed "*nyang'mokuse*" meaning – mother widow who escorted her everywhere.

The widow was given a kitchen knife without a handle and also some certain leaves tied into a small broom. This two she held between her legs. She was not allowed to get up unless to answer the call of nature. She was not supposed to bathe so in the early hours of the morning when everyone was asleep, the mother widow will steal her out to have a bath, then return her before anybody woke up.

After the husband's burial, some women took her to the stream to bath her. When she returned from the stream, she was given the customary navy blue material we called "ndutu" to wear. This she wore for about one year or two years.

v) **Property:**

After the nine day ceremony, the husband's family called a meeting. During this meeting because it was customary for a widow to be taken over by a brother in the family, the family asked the widow who was going to be her next husband. If the widow did not want to be married by another man, she was free to choose any of her children to be her husband. She would no longer be bothered by the family. Thus, she and her children would be left in peace and none will ask about what or what not the deceased left.

If a widow did not have children and wanted to marry outside the family, she had the obligation of returning to the late husband's family her bride price before she was free to marry again. Other wise, whatever children she had with the other man were counted as children of the late husband.

Hospitality

The Bimbiana person is very hospitable person. If a person came to Bimbiana he or she was warmly received. Our mothers had large dishes where they kept fried 'meyo' and kept under the bed so that if we had an unexpected guest, she only had to go behind the house; cut down about two hands of a standing plantains stem and left the other half on the stem for next time. This she cooked quickly and brought out some 'meyo' from the dish and fried some little palm oil and put in a plate with a pinch of salt, then presented to the person concerned. This was the general custom of all Bimbiana women. It is not like now that the country is bad, the Bimbiana man received everybody whether he knew him or not.

We slept with our doors open because nobody stole from another person. We had a quiet life and everyone was each other's keeper. On Sunday evenings our fathers gathered together under a famous village mango tree in front of the Chief's house to chat about many things. We the children then, when there were moonlight, used to play what we called "bolobo" and other games our children of now don't know. We were like children from same parents as we had our meals together.

I remember how I used to take my best friends to Bimbria on holidays when I was at the Basel Mission Girl's School. My parents would make sure that they prepared them when we were going back to school. It was a good life we had; I wish it were still the same.

Social Life

We were a lively community, especially at Christmas season. The village youths would invite a guitarist from Douala (there were two prominent ones Mino and Delegue) who would come and entertain the three villages with "ejimi" music. All the young men of the three villages would come together as agreed upon and had hot "ejimi" competition to see which village danced best. Young men would while dancing bend down to the ground to pick up a handkerchief which was spread on the ground. The village that had more dancers who could perform this art took the first place.

During the dry season there was planned canoe races for our different villages and later the other villages like Botaland and Bota Island came together in Victoria, each village with its own canoe. The women would come out full force to support their men. They stood at the seashore and dance the "Ngoso" dance.

When one village won, money was given to them and there was so much jubilation for the village. This took place about two or three times a year and we shared in the eating of rice, cow meat (as cows were slaughtered for the occasion) and "*mokanjo*" (stockfish). The season was indeed a happy one.

Traditional Meal

Our staple food is plantains, cocoyams, cassava, yams and miyondo. During the rainy season, those who could not afford to feed themselves depended on breadfruit which we have in abundance. The Bimbria man considered anyone who ate "*belle*" as we call it, a poor man. These we ate with fish prepared in different ways, smoked or fresh. In fact, some people I knew at that time never tasted cow meat or any type of meat except meat like chicken.

The Bimbria woman is a very good cook. In fact she is the best cook in Cameroon even if it is I who says so. I remembered a statement made by the late Hon. N. N. Mbille and I quote "if you want the most civilized woman and the best cook, go to Bimbria. This is pride for my Bimbria woman. It's a pity that the old school of women is almost extinct and the younger generation is not in the village to learn our ways and customs. It is not possible for the young generation, but I hope that knowing the little I am able to remember, they may learn at least a little of our tradition.

I will say here that I may not be perfect in my narrative of the old days but I hope you my readers may have a vision of the past. If you are fortunate to read this narrative, may I say thank you for spending your time to do so.

Appreciation

I thank God Almighty for giving me a retentive memory to put this history down. My hearty thanks go to my niece Emma Yoyo Ngale who conceived the initiative and took time to arrange and type.