

DEMOGRAPHIC PRESSURE AND DANGER TO SACRED SITES IN MONGÖ AND NGAMBAYE COUNTRIES IN SOUTHERN CHAD

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ABSTRACT

The Mongö and the Ngambaye are among the populations of the south of Chad who are very attached to their culture. The activities in the sacred sites cover the needs of the populations in all fields: health, education, politics, culture, economy, etc. By respecting a certain number of principles and prohibitions, sacred sites were well protected until recently. In recent decades, they have become a source of conflict between increasing numbers of people. Demographic pressure makes villages grow and leads to an increase in arable land. Population growth is encouraged by the influx of transhumant nomads, who, under the effect of climate change, are moving south in search of pasture. The localities hosting the sites we are studying are located in the oil exploitation zone to which sub-regional expatriates will flock until the 2010s in search of employment. These immigrants swell the populations whose presence is detrimental to the survival of the sacred sites. Their traditional way of management does not fit in with the State's texts.

Keywords: sacred sites, peril, Mongö, Ngambaye, demography.

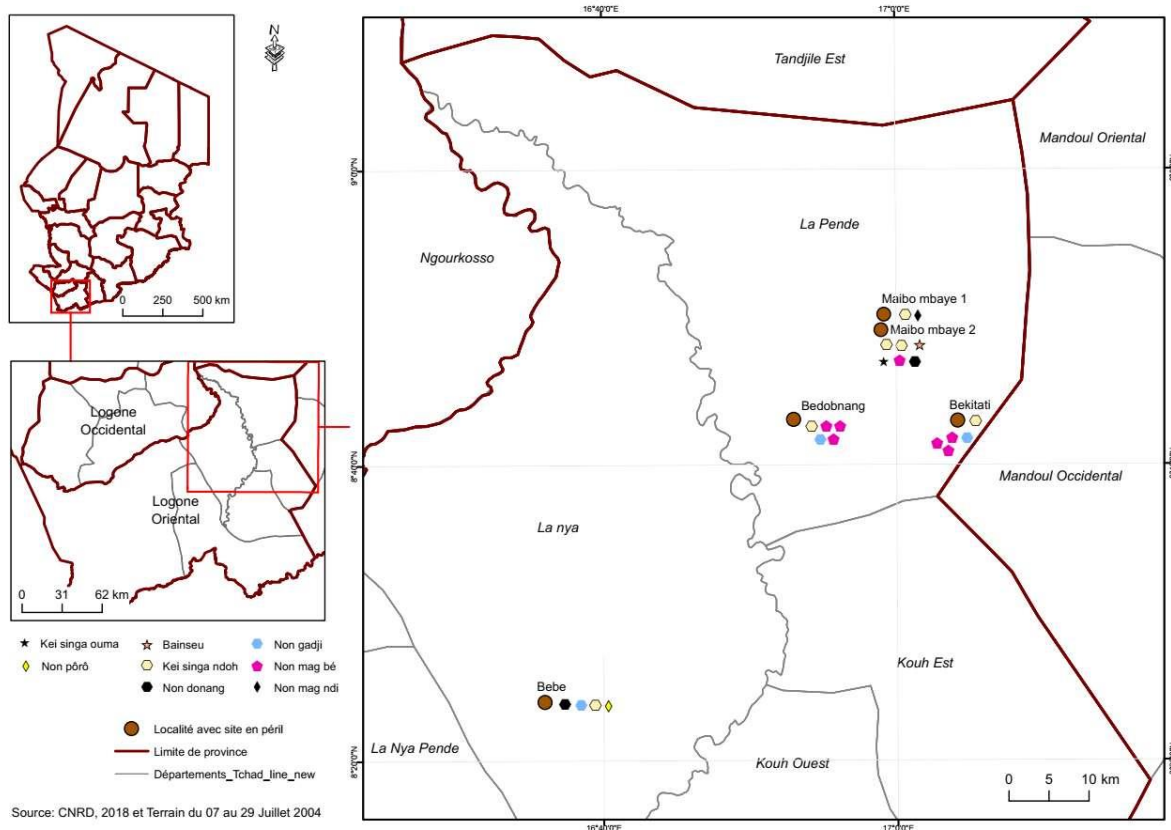
1.0 INTRODUCTION

The peoples of Black Africa attach great importance to their cultural activities. This is the justification for the creation of sacred sites found in almost every community in Africa (ICCRUM, 2009, p. 3). In the southern part of Chad, they have existed since time immemorial. Sometimes called "sacred forests" by some specialists (K. Kokou, 2006, p.22), these geographical spaces are protected by the populations and intended for cultural uses for their own good. They are commonly found among the Sara, in the provinces of the Middle Chari, in the two Logones, in the Tandjilé and in the Mayo Kebbi.

The Mongö and Ngambaye, part of the large Sara ethnic group, are a people of traditional religions. The former are in the Department of Pendé, Eastern Logone province and the latter, mostly in the Western Logone province but also in part of the Eastern Logone, the Tandjilé and the Mayo Dallah. Their main activity is agriculture to which they associate hunting, fishing, gathering, small livestock breeding and handicrafts. Their way of life is linked to sacralization. This leads them to make rites and sacrifices in special places, sacred sites. Of

varied nature, they were identified during the field work. They are gradually losing their sacred characters and some are threatened with extinction.

Map 1: Location of sacred sites in La Pendé and Nya departments.



This study takes stock of the state of knowledge of sacred sites in the localities of Maïnbombaye I and II, Békitati, Bedobnang and Bébé in the departments of Pendé Nya, in the Eastern Logone. The aim is to sound the alarm in order to protect and conserve these cultural assets to which the local populations are attached and which make up the history of the country.

2.0 MATERIALS AND METHOD

The life of the two communities, Mongö and Ngambaye, is essentially based on the sacred. Altars to the deities are created at the foot of trees or in "forests". Other sacred sites are geographical spaces delimited in the bush in a locality and belonging to the user community. They are intended for sacrifices or the organization of ritual ceremonies. Some of them are in the domain of initiation, the others are the domain of the chiefs of the land. Their names vary according to their role and the activity carried out there: non mag bé (altar where an heir priest keeps his ritual objects and comes to make sacrifices), non mag ndi (altar of the rain god), non donang (altar of the chief of the land), kei singa ndoh (camp where new initiates are trained for a long time) and Bainsou (camp where initiates wash before presenting themselves to the public).

We have access to the information thanks to a mission carried out within the framework of the oil exploration project in the Doba basin from 07 to 29 July 2004. It is likely that there has been an evolution since this date. During our stay, we took us to the sites for visits. This enabled us to locate them, identify them and sometimes discover their characteristics and how they differed from one another.

3.0 RESULTS

The exploration of some localities in Mongö and Ngambaye country has brought to light sacred sites. These are groves, trees, and geographical areas, altars located in the bush or close to villages, sometimes in the village itself.

3.1 Sacred sites and their importance for the Mongö and Ngambaye communities

The sacred sites identified in the localities of Mainbombaye I, Mainbombaye II, Békitati, Bédobnang and Bébé are classified in eight categories: non mag ndi, non donang, non mag bé, non gadji, non pörö, kei singa ouma, kei singa ndoh and bänseu. Mag ndi designates the god of rain. His altar has the same name. The priest of the god of rain is commonly called the "maker" of rain, djé ndi. The priest or rainmaker is sometimes the chief of the land. In his altar, he keeps sacred objects to make it rain or to prevent the rain from falling as the case may be¹. These objects are "er ndi", rain stones (D. Mbairam, 1992, p. 16), kept in the non mag ndi sacred site. In the altar of the mag ndi of Mainbombaye I located 30 m north of the village, there are 4 mango trees, two round huts and one rectangular one. One of the round huts is uninhabited. In the rectangular hut the instruments of sacrifice are kept, among them the rain stone. Under a tree stump outside the enclosure, the priest keeps the wild onions (Lothasus) for the sacrifices. This would have a harmful effect on the people. Using these products, whose composition depends on the result he wants to achieve, he makes it rain if he wants to.

Non donang is the altar of the chief of the land. It is located under a lonely tree or in a bush called "sacred forest". The chief of the land is the priest. He comes there to make the sacrifice when there is an epidemic, for example. In this case, he organizes a ritual consisting of inviting everyone to sing after a ritual. While singing and making loud noises, people run to the far end of the village. This movement is called "danné kounda reou'd", setting the disease in motion. Tradition explains that this ritual is the sending of the disease away from the village. Usually, he organizes a ceremony during which he makes the sacrifice once a year, at the beginning of the harvest, to thank the god who has given good harvests and food to the people. He performs rites to send enemies away or make them lose their destination, i.e. to divert them. It is also in front of the non donang that the land chief pleads for peace and prosperity in the village. In short, everything is done to ensure the security of the population. At the beginning of the initiation sessions, the chief of the land always organizes a sacrifice for the health and prosperity of all the initiates, but especially the neophytes.

¹ Informant: DJIMTAROM Kotingar, 72 years old, representative of the chief of the land, interview conducted on 09 July 2004 in Ndouba- Békitati.

Non mag bé is an altar where an heir priest keeps his ritual objects and comes to make sacrifices. This priest belongs to the clan whose ancestor is the founder of the divinity that protects his "children" and their property. It can impose itself on this clan by a dream and the clan can buy it if the patriarch deems it necessary (A. N. Djimlem, 2014, p. 88). Three sacred trees have been recognized in the above-mentioned localities: *Ficus platyphyla* in the village of Békitati, *Tamarindus indica* in Maïnbombaye II and *Ficus thonningii* in Bédobnang. Sacrifices are made to the deity in case of illness of the children or incurable disease.

At Maïnbombaye I, the site is located to the west of the village, about 50 meters into the bush. Ritual objects are kept at the foot of a tree. This tree becomes sacred. At the time of the visit, that of Maïnbombaye II was in the village while the other of Békitati is situated behind the huts thirty meters to the east.

There is another similar site called non gadji. It designates an altar whose priest is a benefactor who is not necessarily a chief of the land, a rainmaker, nor a priest of initiation. In this altar are planted various products intended to protect people from invulnerability as a preventive measure against man-made threats. In the locality of Bébé, the site has a double function: the priest cures incurable diseases².

In Sara country, a special place is given to initiation. The instruments sought for the organization of this ceremony are also valuable and kept in a special place called non pörö or guel gang. Gang, the big tam-tam is the main instrument of music and ritual dances of the initiates. It is kept in the non pörö. This place is sacred and forbidden to any initiate. Only those who are being prepared to take over the duties of initiation priest can enter.

The initiates have a coded language and communicate with spirits. In the locality of Bébé, fifty meters to the north-east there is a place called kei singa ouma where products including wild onions of several species are kept for the activities of the initiates. It is the people in charge of initiation who access it at the appropriate time to perform rituals. It is a ceremony that consists, they say, in communicating with the spirits. There is a *Ficus cordata*, (bbol) under which the sacrifice is made. The aim is to learn the cures for incurable diseases by imploring the spirits or to find out, for example, which thief should be expelled from the community because of his undesirable behaviour³. The importance of this site is that the insiders make their contribution to solving problems that humans have no solution for.

While the Mongö and Ngambaye are concerned about peace, security and their well-being, they are no less concerned about the education of their offspring. Traditionally, they have established a training framework for their older boys. They are trained in the bush, in the sacred "forest" called kei singa ndoh, a term widely used among the Mongö. Generally speaking, it refers to the camp for initiates. They can be found in all the localities visited, but their proximity to the village varies from one site to another. That of Maïnbombaye II, currently in use, is situated 20 m to the north-west behind the huts between a tamarind tree, a mango tree and a cailcedrat, while the initiation site of Bédobnang is 300 m from the huts.

² Informant: NGARHOUDOUM Reoudingam, 76, village chief, interview conducted on 17 July 2004 in Bébé, canton Komé.

³ Informant: NGARHOTENADJI Ngarpeur, 78 years old, chief of land, interview conducted on 07 July 2004 at Maïnbombaye II

There are three kinds of initiation sites. The first, kei singa ndoh, is the camp where new initiates are trained for a long time. The second is the Bainseu, where they stay to wash before presenting themselves to the public at a ceremony marking the end of their training. Finally, the third called non gadji de mon is, unlike the first two which are located in the bush, is in the village. This is where the initiation priest keeps the wild onions, Lothasus (nduja) and other products necessary for the exercise of his activity. Mango trees are planted here, but millet and groundnuts have been cultivated all around this site.

The majority of these sites are under threat. They are classified by localities and departments in the table below.

Table 1: List of localities and sacred sites in the departments of La Pendé and Nya

Départments	Locations	Sacred sites
La pendé	Maïnbombaye I	Non donang
		Non ndi
		Autel du « mon »
	Maïbombaye II	Kei singa ndoh
		Non donang
		Arbre sacré
		Bainseu
	Békitati	Kei singa ndoh
	Bédobnang	Kei singa ndoh
		Non mag
Arbre sacré		
La Nya	Bébé	Non donang
		Non gadji
		Non pörö guel gang
		Kei singa

3.2 Threats to sacred sites

Sacred sites are threatened by various demographic factors. Indeed, demographic pressure negatively affects sacred sites in the Pendé and Nya departments. Two phenomena are noticeable: the first is the enlargement of villages. The new huts built outside the villages are moving closer to sites previously located quite far from the population for reasons of security and discretion. Certain products stored in the sites are dangerous for the population. They are called "kouma ge ad", bitter products. Others, such as products used to perform miracles, should only be known by initiates or priests. In spite of the prohibitions, the elders prefer to keep these objects far enough away from laymen, hence the distance from the sites where they are kept. In addition to these problems, there are also the needs of the numerous populations for fields. The new, increasingly large fields affect the protected sites that were once in the bush, far from the huts. The dimensions of these sites are gradually being reduced.

The second is the influx of people from regions with low rainfall where there is insufficient grazing, there is also significant immigration due to oil exploitation. The localities of Mainbombaye I and II, Békitati, Bédobnang and Bébé are located in the oil exploitation zone where the migratory influx is very considerable. Migrants have come from other sub-regions of Black Africa: Cameroon, Gabon, Central African Republic, Equatorial Guinea, Congo and the Democratic Republic of Congo. These migrants, more and more numerous, trample on the prohibitions regulating the life of sacred sites in the above-mentioned localities.

Climate change creates another problem for sacred sites. The findings of the work on climate change undertaken in Villach, Austria, in October 1985 indicated that surface temperatures would increase by 1.5 to 4.5°C by the year 2030 as a result of greenhouse warming (UNEP, 1990, p. 13). In Chad, the phenomenon is remarkable among farmers and herders. The latter include transhumant herders who move from the Saharan and Sahelian areas of the north and centre of the country to the savannah south (where vegetation is abundant) at the beginning of the dry season in search of pasture. Not all of them distinguish sacred sites from other geographical areas. Conflicts between herders and farmers arise. Transhumant herders knowingly or inadvertently desecrate sacred sites, creating problems that the authorities try to solve by tracing the corridors. This is partly due to the very remarkable demographic pressure in recent decades.

3.3 Traditional land management among the Mongö and Ngambaye people

Local people have their own way of managing land. The founder of the village is responsible for this⁴. He is called the chief of the land. He is also responsible for the land within a certain radius which is recognised by the surrounding villages. When a foreigner arrives in the village and wishes to live there permanently, his host poses his problem to the council of wise men who observe him for several months to assess his morality before allocating him a space for the construction of a dwelling house. The same council allocates him another piece of land for agriculture. He can increase the size of his fields at will as long as he does not harm the interests of others⁵.

As for the rest of the land, it is preserved for hunting, gathering and other activities such as crafts whose raw materials are found in the bush. This is where wood is collected for the construction of huts, attics and racks⁶. Large trees are also identified for the manufacture of dugout canoes. Some areas are reserved for practices such as initiation⁷. This bush belongs to the community which benefits from it. It defends its destruction while knowing that bush fires do not destroy it and do not destroy the sacred sites. Through this mode of land management, they are protected.

3.4 Land management according to the Chadian State

⁴ Informant: NGARHOTENADJI Ngarpeur, 78 years old, chief of land, interview conducted on 07 July 2004 at Mainbombaye II.

⁵ Informant: MOUNRO Gabriel, 75 years old, chief of land, interview conducted on 10 July 2004 in Bédobnang.

⁶ Informant: DJIMSAYOM Eloi, 63 years old, village chief of Mainbombaye III, interview conducted on 08 July 2004 in Mainbombaye III.

⁷ Informant: NDIGUINODJI Emmanuel, 55 years old, acting chief of the village Békondjo I, canton Mainbombaye, interview conducted on 07 July 2004 in Békondjo I.

The Chadian State has texts on land tenure. It has always been said that land belongs to the state. The authorities manage the land according to these texts. Law No. 24 of 22 July 1967 on land ownership and customary rights obliges owners to register land⁸. The Mongö and Ngambaye of Mainbombaye I and II, Békitati, Bédobnang and Bébé are obliged to register their sacred sites if they want to appropriate, protect and conserve them.

On the same date, another text on the limitation of land rights, Law n° 67-25 in its article 2 stipulates that "Expropriation is the procedure by which the public authority obliges a legal or natural person to transfer to it the ownership of a building or a real right, for a public purpose or in return for compensation"⁹. By this text, the State has the possibility, in case of need, to expropriate the owners of land.

The framework in which land laws are best applied is justice. The court of first instance in Moundou declared in judgment No. 45 of 23 November 1985 that 'All land, even customary, remains the property of the cadastral services, and therefore of the state ... which can attribute it to any person who so requests' (T. Ronelngué, 1999, p. 90). It follows from this judgment that the State has the power to wrest any land from any owner as a legal or natural person. In this case, the owner is a legal person. For one reason or another, a sacred site may be uprooted from a community.

3.5 Chadian texts on the protection of sacred sites

Chad has no texts specific to sacred sites. However, there are some on sacred sites. Given that sacred sites are cultural heritage and that they are classified as cultural property, we can consider the texts that bring them all together. Law No. 14-60 of November 2, 1960 has as its object "the protection of monuments and natural sites, sites and monuments of prehistoric, archaeological, scientific, artistic or picturesque character, the classification of historical or ethnographic objects and the regulation of excavations". The property of the communities on the national territory is protected by this law. As it was deemed unsatisfactory or unsuitable, it was revised and replaced by the law of 24 December 2018 aimed at preserving and enhancing cultural heritage.

These two laws do not address the specific problems of sacred sites that are part of the environment being destroyed. Some sacred sites are called "sacred forests". When one thinks of the cutting of wood in these areas defended by some and destroyed by others, the law on the protection of the environment could be a solution. To this end, Law No. 014/PR/98 defining the general principles of environmental protection, in its Article 17 notes that "The protection, conservation, restoration and enhancement of the historical and cultural heritage are of national interest. They are part of the national policy for the protection and development of the environment".

These are the state texts that can be adapted to the context of sacred sites in the Mongö and Ngambaye communities in southern Chad.

⁸ Loi n° 24 du 22 juillet 1967

⁹ Loi n° 67-25 du 22 juillet 1967

4.0 DISCUSSION

The Mongö and the Ngambaye have created sacred sites in their respective villages which they have maintained out of necessity from the beginning and from generation to generation. But as populations grow, their protection and conservation pose problems. Population growth in these localities is due to the following three factors: natural growth, the attraction of populations from outside the area to an oil-producing zone and transhumance linked to climate change. Populations among the indigenous people, who have converted to the revealed religions (Christianity and Islam), have become numerous and are struggling against the cultural values of the sacred sites. As a result, they are more or less encouraging non-indigenous people to desecrate them on the one hand and to destroy them on the other, despite local prohibitions.

These sites must be protected. International institutions became aware of this at a very early stage. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) was created in 1945, the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM) in 1956 and the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) in 1965. They initiate texts in favor of cultural property, which involves the States Parties. The 1972 UNESCO Convention aims to protect the world natural and cultural heritage¹⁰. The 2003 Convention concerns the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage¹¹. These two Conventions aim to protect tangible and intangible cultural property respectively. The first Convention deals with tangible property and the second with intangible property. Sacred sites and their management are concerned by the two texts ratified by the Chadian State. It is up to the country to continue the efforts of this institution to create texts in relation to its own realities. This is lacking and creates a vacuum in favor of those who destroy sacred sites.

For example, by creating laws to protect any sacred site and strictly enforcing them, the prohibitions that are laws made by communities will be respected by everyone. In this way, these sites will be protected. The Chadian state has not adopted laws specific to sacred sites, nor has it rigorously enforced existing texts.

Yet these sites are beneficial for the populations concerned. When they have worries, they turn to the ancestors or deities in accordance with the principles. A community seeking protection seeks protection from the protecting power through prayers and sacrifices (K. Lilyan, 2007, p. 56). Prayers and sacrifices are made in specific and sacred places, such as altars. When an altar disappears, they cannot take place as required by tradition. That is why sacred sites must exist. Their location cannot be changed unless the priest deems it feasible. Not all sacred sites are necessarily in the village, neither in the bush nor in between. Their location depends on the case. Initiates sites such as the kei singa ndo must necessarily be far from the villages because there are behaviors and facts to be hidden from the uninitiated. Moreover, they are dangerous places. At night, one often hears 'the voice of the ancestors' hooting (J. Fortier, 1982, p. 219). As for the rainmakers' altars, they must be kept away from

¹⁰ UNESCO Convention adopted by the General Conference in Paris at its session of 16 November 1976

¹¹ UNESCO Convention adopted on 17 October 2003 in Paris and entered into force in 2006 after ratification by 30 States Parties

the population and even hidden because of the danger they represent. By neglecting the rules of access to these places, one can be struck by lightning.

Threat factors to sacred sites linked to climate change are mainly the movement of transhumant from the arid zones in the north to the wooded and grassy savannah in the south. The Chadian state has taken the initiative to establish transhumance corridors that are not respected.

5.0 CONCLUSION

The creation of sacred sites by the Mongö and Ngambaye communities in the departments of Pendé and Nya is not without effect. It contributes to the social, political, economic and cultural life of the populations. Their development depends on it. But population growth is an obstacle to this cultural way of life.

With a population of 15.1 million in 2018, the annual growth rate in Chad is 3.6% (INSEED, 2018). The population of Logone Oriental is 1,082,404. The population density of the Eastern Logone, which is 28.4 inhabitants/km², cannot be said to lack cultivable space. As a solution to the problem of space for agriculture, other land in Logone Oriental is available.

If climate change, a consequence of the warming caused by the greenhouse effect, is a natural phenomenon against which the fight is not easy, the Chadian State, which has the power of decision, is in a position, within the framework of the protection of sacred trees and forests, to demand strict respect for transhumance corridors and the establishment of a map of the location of cultural sites.

The management and conservation of cultural sites became, a few decades ago, a major concern in southern Chad, particularly in the Eastern Logone. Sacred sites are threatened among the Mongö and Ngambaye. They become fields, are desecrated or threatened with extinction. Texts on their protection have been created, but there is a problem of applicability. This reflection is a wake-up call for these endangered sacred sites whose main cause is demographic pressure. One of the solutions is the application of State texts and those of International Organizations ratified by Chad.

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