

## SOME NOTES ON THE TRADITIONAL BELIEF SYSTEMS: THE CASE OF TRIAL BY ORDEAL IN GAWU DISTRICT, c. 1750-1940.

By

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### Abstract

The traditional belief systems of Gawu people was a great influencer to its ability in handling serious and heinous crimes through the used trial by ordeal. The practice brought discipline and instituted crime free society to the admiration of its neighbors. The practice may appear unorthodox and brutish but have to a great extent its advantages. The objective was to establish how this traditional practice was effectively applied and its attendant's results in the society. However, as a result of increased spread of orthodox religions, particularly Islam and Christianity, the traditional belief systems and trial by ordeal have drastically declined.

**Keywords:** Traditional Belief systems, Trial by Ordeal, and Gawu District

### Introduction

Gawu District belongs to a Gbagyi group commonly referred to as Gbagyi Yamma by the Hausa. The old site of Gawu town was located on a hilltop at about 2000 ft above sea level. It was located mid-way between Suleja town to the East and Lapai to the Southwest. The site was bounded by River Gurara to the east and River Jatau to the North-east.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the District area consists of good land area covered with orchard and a number of swampy tracts conducive for human habitation.<sup>2</sup> In 1931, the old site was abandoned by the people due to increased population and request by the British Colonial Government for them to relocate to the plains towards the Northern part of the hill, referred to as Zango by Hausa people.<sup>3</sup> Sequel, to the creation of a new Federal Capital Territory at Abuja, Gawu and some of its Eastern areas came under the sphere of the Federal Capital, leaving some parts in Niger State.<sup>4</sup> However, due to the option the Federal Military Government gave the affected communities in the newly created territory to either leave or remain within the territory, the people of Gawu decided to join their kith and kin in Niger State. As a result, Niger State Government provided a new settlement for the people further north of the old site at Lambata in 1981, while some of the people remained at old Gawu in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), since the relocation was made optional by Federal Government.<sup>5</sup>

1. Forde, D. ed *Ethnographic Survey of Africa* International African Institute, London, 1960 P.85 - P.86.

<sup>2</sup> Baba, Isa. *History of the People of Gawu*, Nanbo Investment Limited, Minna. 1998 P.2

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Supplementary to Official Gazette, Extra - Ordinary No.7 Vol. 63, 5th Feb. 1976, Federal Capital Territory Decree

No.6, 1976. Printed by Federal Ministry of Information printing Division, Lagos 1976 section 16.

<sup>5</sup> Interim Report of the Presidential AD-HOC Committee on Resettlement of the Inhabitants of Fed. Cap. Territory, Govt., Press Lagos 1980.

## Belief System

Generally speaking, the worship of ancestral gods at shrines, family cults and deity was a common practice among other Gbagyis, Koros, Kadaras, Kamukus and Bassas their neighbors. They believed in the Omnipotence of God, who punishes the wicked and reward the innocent but revered the worship of ancestral gods, cults and deities as supplementary to their belief in God. Similarly, in Gawu like most other Gbagyi communities, it believed in Zhiba cults. The Zhiba cult was regarded as the cradle of town, clan and family compound. Usually there were two Zhibas, family owned, placed at the entrance of the compound and the town owned planted outside the town made of small huts of stones. In a similar spirit, each family compound, clan and lineage in Gawu likewise in other Gbagyi land believe and venerate totem, mostly of wild animals which they believe protect members of the family. In Gawu, one of its suburbs called Fuka was regarded as the ancestral home of the ruling dynasty. It was reported that Fuka was the first place where the ruling dynasty first settled before ascending to meet the people of Gawu on the hill top at the beginning of the 18th century. Thus, Fuka was revered by the people and consequently all Gawu Chiefs were buried at Fuka and it was also regarded as the cradle of their powers. Until today, all appointed Chief of Gawu were confirmed into office from Fuka.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, it was considered a taboo for newly married couples to shave their hair until their first child was born. It was feared that if they cut their hair before the birth of the child, the woman would have a miscarriage. On the fifth day when the child was born, both couples and the new-born would have a clean shave. During pregnancy, the husband had to place little piles of beans, guinea corn, etc at the foot of a termite hill and pray to his ancestors to ensure that his children multiply. The husband was also forbidden from building a new house and the woman was forbidden from dyeing of woven cloth.<sup>7</sup> After the birth of a child, the umbilical cord was stretched to the child's knee, laid across a corn stalk and severed. Pounded leaves of the Sodom apple, mixed with shea butter was used as ointment to smear on the child's naval for it to heal.

The umbilical cord was expected to fall within two days and it was taken and sewn with some shaved hair of the child to make a charm, which was hung around his neck to drive off evil spirits.<sup>8</sup> On the fifth day, a name was given to the new-born by the father after due consultation with fortune Sayers called *Balle-da*. The fortune Sayers juggles few pebbles of cowry shells and stones gotten from River Gurara and sometimes from its tributaries called *Nuwafudna* and *Sudna*. The pebbles and cowry shells were thrown to the ground to suggest the name of a reputable ancestor, season, event, occasion and grandparents. However, it was left to the father of the child to accept any of the suggested names.<sup>9</sup> The circumcision of the male child

<sup>6</sup> NAK: Minprof M. 3463. *Op.cit* P.8-12. Isa Baba.

<sup>7</sup> Oral Interview, late Alhaji Musa Tukura, Pandaki of Gawu Interviewed on 26<sup>th</sup> Nov. 1988.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* NAK, Min. Prof. M. 3467, Niger Province enquiry into the custom of the people 1939. P1

<sup>9</sup> Oral Interview, Late Alhaji Musa Tukura *Op.cit*

used to take place between the third and the fifth month after birth, it may lapse to three years.<sup>10</sup>

There were various forms of creating harmony among the people through social gathering at different occasions principally aimed at fostering a common sense of belonging in the community. This type of social gathering includes *Sallah* dance, which was performed during the Month of Muslim *Id-Kabir* festival, *Egu* dance held to mourn the death of an elder or traditional title holder and *djangede* dance organised to mourn the death of custodians of the grave yard of Gawu Chiefs at Fuka.<sup>11</sup> Masquerades such as *Kuche-Nago*, *Kuche Ashama* and *Kuche wagu*, were found in Gawu. The last two, appeared to be of Koro origin and were organised separately by *Tse-tsigan* and *Gbitipe* compound in Dawaki wards to entertain the Public during marriage and naming ceremonies.<sup>12</sup> The big masquerade of the town commonly referred to as the *Etsu's* masquerade *Kaka Mangiwa* was organised by the people of *Mko*. It used to make its appearance in the Month of July on the request of the *Etsu*. If there was peace in the town, it appears on the third day of the request amidst music and never to be sighted by women. If there was no peace, it appeared of the fifth day with no music played before it retired to its cult. The masquerade was purposely organised to usher in prosperity during the rainy season.<sup>13</sup>

*Gbenu* fetish was referred to as the rainmaker because it was organised in the Month of May when rainy season was about to set in there were signs of draught by the people of *Kitipka* and *Tando*. Before the festival commenced, the *Etsu* was required to make sacrifice of goat and cock at the grave yard of his ancestors at Fuka after which the pot drums *Nyaki* was played for five days before it rained.<sup>14</sup> Other known forms of cultural practices among the people could be found in their farming method and crafts such as pottery making, mat weaving, wood carving, leather work, black smith and local cloth weaving. However, it is not the intention of this paper to discuss any of these cultural practices not to lose focus of the topic.<sup>15</sup>

## Trial by Ordeal

The procedure of administering justice and settling disputes in Gbagyi communities varied and depended largely on the nature of the dispute and offence committed by an individual or groups of people.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, all criminal acts committed by an individual were looked upon as being the affairs of the family or clan rather than that of individual responsibility. This practice had a restraining influence on the individual life and how he conducted himself in the society, since the family or clan was involved in the payment of fines that might be imposed

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* There were three wards in Gawu; Mko/Kaura, Kopati and Dawaki Wards. The two-ruling dynasty in the town comes from the first two wards while the last ward produces the Madaki

<sup>13</sup> Oral Interview, late Mal. Shuaibu Nkoche of Gawu, Interviewed on 7<sup>th</sup> June 1989.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> See details in Baba, Isa. "Cloth wearing in Gawu District in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries" M.A. Thesis, Department

of History, Bayero University Kano. 1991 and Isa Baba, *History of the people of Gawu* Nanbo Investment Ltd. Minna, 1989.

<sup>16</sup> Forde, D *Op.cit* P.85 – P86

on its member and would suffer indignation, stigmata and negative repercussion.<sup>17</sup> In Gawu, minor cases such as fighting, cheating, quarrel and disputes over property were usually referred to the *Etsu* (Chief) who in the presence of his councilors called *Sakis* who usually recommended payment of cowry shells or canning of the guilty in the *Etsu's* palace or at the market square.<sup>18</sup> Major cases such as theft, murder, fornication, adultery, witchcraft were referred to the Chief priest *Eshadagai/Akuchidagai*. Here the suspect was obliged to choose from the two forms of trial, to either swear with the fetish administered by the chief priest in the public or in his cult.<sup>19</sup> It depends where such crimes were committed, the priest's cult was strategically located within the suburbs of the town. In *Yinpa* Compound in *Dawaki* ward, the cult was organized by the masquerade called, *Kuche*, *Yinpa*. In Tando, towards the Southwestern flank of the town, the people were in charge of *Kuche Barwa* while on the Eastern side of the town, *Kitipka* the people were responsible for *Kuche Bome*. A suspect that wished to swear with any of this fetish in the public was required to produce a full gourd of local beer to the Chief priest, who would then recite incantations and pour some prepared concocted powder of ground lizard and toad for the suspect to drink. If a suspect vomits the concoction, he was hailed by members of his family, and if found guilty of the crime committed, the substance remains with him.<sup>20</sup>

In a situation where a suspect wished to take an oath in secret, he was required to produce the same quantity of local beer and a cock. The cult was made of a small hut with a black stone inside it where the suspect was stripped naked with his hands placed on the stone before the oath was administered to him. This time, the oath was made from the same substance as in the case of the public oath taking except that ground henna leaves, *lale* was added to it. The suspect was required to stand and remain naked and warned by the Chief priest that if he lies, he would die within a week.<sup>21</sup> After the oath had been administered to the suspect and without spilling out any substance of the concoction, he was required to abstain from eating in the same bowl with members of his family for seven days so that he would not stain them of the oath. If after seven days nothing happened, the suspect was pronounced innocent and hailed by members of his family. However, if the suspect dies before the expiration of seven days, his property and wealth was forfeited to the Chief priest.<sup>22</sup> The priest would keep the property in his cult and select valuable ones for himself. It was believed that any member of the deceased that inherited his property would die. After the event blood of a slaughtered cock was poured over the stone in the cult, which was followed with a feast and the consumption of local beer. A suspect that survived from the oath was required to give a ram and seven bowls of local beer to the priest.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Oral Interview, Late Alhaji Musa Tukura *Op.cit*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>20</sup> Oral Interview, Late Mal. Shuaibu *Op.cit*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>22</sup> Baba, Isa. "Cloth weaving *Op.cit* P.17

<sup>23</sup> NAK: Min. Prof M. 3467 Niger Province: *Op.cit* P.6 – P8.

## The Repercussions

The repercussion of the oath taken by the deceased continued to haunt the rest members of his family left behind to wherever their live. If a family lost its member to the oath, the consequences were grave. The Community looked at such a family with disdain, stigma and disregard to a point that some family members may decide to leave the town and relocate to a neighboring Gbagyi towns to avoid the embarrassment caused to them by their deceased member. In some instances, the family may choose to remain in Gawu and continuously withstand the worst of humiliation from the public.<sup>24</sup>

In a situation where some members of the deceased family relocated to other Gbagyi towns, after an interval of one to two years the Chief priest or any member of his cult would trace the new abode during communal interactive activities such as marriages, burial and market sessions in the region. The priest operates indirectly and in secret through the *Balle* fortune teller in the new town, in order to get to relations of the deceased that left Gawu. He would give some of concocted herbs to the fortune teller to administer to the relations of the deceased in their new found towns, in order to cleanse themselves from the sins of the deceased relations. In most instances, the fortune teller might encourage the relations of the deceased to return to Gawu. It was left for him to heed to such advice. Whatever were the decisions of the deceased relations, they were already trapped to the same treatment of the cult either at Gawu or their new found towns by being hallucinated to believe that they were being haunted by the sins of their deceased relation.<sup>25</sup>

Under the hypnotic condition, the fortune teller called on the relations of the deceased and disclosed to them the reasons behind their migration from Gawu and demand each family member to come over to his cult and take some concocted herbs to cleanse themselves in order to avoid been haunted by the sins of their deceased relations. Paradoxically, few days after the herbs were administered the family members of the deceased would also die one after the other. In the event the relations of the deceased heeded the advice of the fortune teller and returned or remained in Gawu, after the death of their family member, the same fate would still befall the family.<sup>26</sup>

## Similar Traditions

It should be noted that similar tradition existed in parts of the region among the Gbagyi, Koro, Bassa and Hausa, though with some variation.<sup>27</sup> The Gbagyi of Kwali whose origin claimed to have come from a village near Gawu in 1744 AD had similar tradition.<sup>28</sup> In Kwali, there were two types of oath, *agunu* and the fetish oath. *Agunu* oath was taken in the public and was less effective while the fetish oath was taken in the secret. In either case, after the oath was administered to the suspect, he was required to eat alone and not to shave his head for three

<sup>24</sup> Oral Interview, Late Alhaji Musa Tukura and late Mal. Shuiabu Naibi—Op.cit

<sup>25</sup> Ibid

<sup>26</sup> Mal Naibi, Shuiabu and Alhaji Hassan Gwari Gade and Koro University of Ibadan Press 1969.

<sup>27</sup> NAK: SNP/10/651P/1913 Nassarawa Province, Abuja Division Barden Sarki District (Dikko) Assessment Report by W.M. Morgan 1913 P.18-P25. NAK:SNP/10/410P/1919 Nassarawa Province koton Karfe Division, Jinjiri District, Assessment report by W.M. Morgan 1919 P.31.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid

years. If the suspect did not die within the period, it meant he was innocent of the allegations against him. He was given a cock and a he-goat to sacrifice before shaving his head. However, if he died, his relations would sacrifice the he-goat to prevent been stained by the oath. The deceased would be buried outside the village by the priest and his property thrown away.<sup>29</sup> Among the Gbagyi of Dikko, the oath taking was referred to Mama cult. The effect was that the guilty would swell-up immediately and drop dead.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, among the Koro people in the Kafin Koro area, after a suspect had taken the oath, a line was drawn on the ground or string was laid on the ground for the suspect to cross in order to attest his innocence depending on which of these methods was used by the priest. The effects of the penalty on perjury was not directly exacted on the perjurer, but on the entire members of his family who later would die one after the other, until the suspect confessed his guilt, after which the curse was removed.<sup>31</sup> The Bassa had a varied tradition, suspects were given a spoonful of boiling shea butter in the public, if the mouth of the suspect burns, he was considered guilty and if not he was considered innocent.<sup>32</sup> This may not be considered as an effective means of establishing the truth among suspects, since naturally all hot substance was bound to be painful and hurt the mouth of any person, suspect or the innocent. Among the Hausa of Abuja (now Suleja), the oath was administered by the Sarkin Gwaska. The oath was made from sasswood, a poisonous tree and administered to a suspect to prove his innocence. If he vomits the substance, the complainants' property was forfeited to the priest and if the suspect was guilty of the crime committed, he dies.<sup>33</sup>

On a comparative note, it was clear that the import of the tradition to Kwali was from Gawu and not the other way around. Similarly, it was likely that the two communities share the same origin, more so that they belong to the same Gbagyi group and two communities were not distantly far from each other. As for the Koro and Bassa traditions, suspects were subjected to poisonous substance, which in most cases resulted in disastrous death. In both Gawu and Koro traditions, death did not only consume a member a family that committed such crime but the entire family perished one after the other with time for being relations of the latter, since they were individually required to undergo the same ordeal later to purify themselves from the crime committed by their relations.<sup>34</sup>

It was not certain from where and how the tradition of trial by ordeal came to Gawu. According to Gawu tradition, the practice was inherited from their ancestors and had been in existence ever since.<sup>35</sup> It was difficult to state whether this claim was true or not, however it was likely that the Hausas of Abuja, now Suleja would have borrowed the tradition from Gawu or came along with it to the region at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, the tradition appeared more elaborate and better organized in Gawu than in Abuja. On the whole, the essence of the trial by ordeal was to punish serious and heinous cases and to instill discipline

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid* P.24

<sup>30</sup> NAK: SNP/10/651P/*Op.cit* P.8

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid* P.25

<sup>32</sup> NAK: /SNP/10/410P/*Op.cit* P.31

<sup>33</sup> Mal Naibi, Shuaibu and Alhaji Hassan *Op.cit* P.23

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>35</sup> Oral Interview, late Alhaji Musa Tukura and late Mal. Shuaibu Nkoche *Op.cit*



and peace in the community. It should be pointed out that Gawu use by ordeal was wide spread among the neighboring regions. In 1927, a special enquiry into the customs of the people in the Niger Province, reported that a whole household from Ebbo in Lapai area died one after the other for taking the Gawu fetish oath.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, in 1936, a man from Lapai town who wanted to prove his innocence for committing perjury died after taking the Gawu oath.<sup>37</sup> In 1937, the Emir of Lapai sent a household of Ganagana people in his domain to Gawu to take the oath, and the result was death on all that took it.<sup>38</sup> However, due to the increased spread of both Islam and Christian faith among the people, especially as from the 1930s, these practices gradually disappeared from the culture of the people.

## Conclusions

Gawu belief system was unique compared with what was obtained in other Gbagyi societies, starting from the worship of idols, ancestral shrines, marriage system, child birth, naming of the child to adulthood. It was this organized state system that gave birth to how the society handled its minor to very heinous crime. Thus, the Trial by Ordeal in Gawu was a reflection of some of the rich cultural values of the people that demonstrated how most African Societies handled any unwarranted behavior among its citizens. The trial methods were not limited to Gawu alone however the practice was distinct in Gawu and better organized than what was obtained in other societies in the region.

As demonstrated in the explanation above, the essence of the trial was to punish most serious and heinous cases and of course to instill discipline in the society as a whole. The society had a restraining influence on the life of its members and their conduct in the society. Consequently, the punishment and its repercussion were a great deterrent to committing crime in the society. In any case, since all anti-social behavior committed by an individual had a holistic responsibility on the family, it was the responsibility of the family to ensure proper upbringing of their family members. The relevance of this value judgement to our present-day Nigerian society may be enormous. If the virtue of administering the ordeal to suspect should be adopted, it may go a long way in eradicating heinous crimes, such as armed robbery, kidnapping, killings and all other anti-social behaviors that had continuously pervaded the Nigerian society today without necessarily going through the stress of our law courts.

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<sup>36</sup> NAK: Min: Prof. 3467 Op.cit P.6

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

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