certaines de leurs prérogatives pour s’en tailler d’autres, tels qu’ils ont utilisé les innovations techniques, en ont introduit de nouvelles, comme l’école ou le commerce international — sont brillamment analysées. Tout ceci est très densément rattaché à un arrière-fond qui décrit par petites touches la vie et la pensée hawsa de façon très suggestive, en s’appuyant sur des exemples concrets et vivants. Un autre mérite du livre est de mettre en évidence la guerre prédatrice et de nous montrer le rôle essentiel qu’elle jouait auparavant à tous les niveaux. Elle était le moteur principal de la dynamique cheffale, et on peut mesurer l’importance de son abolition par les efforts qu’ont fait les chefs pour lui trouver des solutions de remplacement. Nous sommes loin ici d’une Afrique idyllique et immobile : cet élément central n’est pas traité de façon abstraite, comme c’est si souvent le cas, mais il repose sur les souvenirs et les témoignages des intéressés eux-mêmes, un discours auquel les ethnologues substituent un peu trop fréquemment le leur.

L’auteur parsème son récit de réflexions sur le cinéma ethnographique et ses contraintes matérielles. Elle nous fait part de ses expériences de tournage et de montage avec beaucoup d’intelligence et de sensibilité en prenant très nettement position sur les stratégies et les méthodes qu’elle préconise. Pour ma part, ces débats et prises de positions pontifs au demeurant, me laissent indifférent. Cependant, l’auteur a certainement bien fait de les inclure pour ceux qui s’intéressent à ces questions, et ils sont nombreux. Mais, ces querelles mises à part, ce qui m’intéresse est moins la façon de faire un film que de le voir et de le juger à mon aune, de quelque prémisses qu’il découle, et ce livre m’a, en plus de ce que j’ai écrit, donné l’envie de voir le film.

Jean-Claude Muller


The peoples of the Mandara highlands of north Cameroon and northeastern Nigeria are commonly regarded as classically patriarchal, egalitarian and acephalous. How very wrong this is; even the smallest social formation, a single settlement of subsistence farmers perched on a rocky massif, is a hierarchy waiting to happen. In this major ethnographic work, Jeanne-Françoise Vincent redresses the balance by focusing on one of the larger ethno-linguistic clusters that comprises the full range of social formations from the unhierarchized clan settlement to chiefdoms ruled by potent “princes.” It is with elucidation of the nature of their power and its relationship to the sacred that the book is primarily concerned.

Vincent began work with the Mofu-Diamaré in 1968, and by 1990 had carried out fifteen missions amongst them, varying in length from three to eight weeks of intensive fieldwork. The diachronic perspective that she has achieved over this period is one of the great strengths of a finely contextualized study that combines a structural-functionalist approach with a marked concern for historical development and change. This is evident not only in this monograph, but in many other of her publications—sixteen are listed in the bibliography, and there are more—that deal with the Mofu-Diamaré and regional history.
Who are the Mofu-Diamaré? This is no easy question. They number perhaps 60,000, speak six languages and form 36 or more political entities in an area of around 670 km². Vincent’s definitional process, which discards administrative and other imposed classifications for a construct that corresponds closely to native perceptions, is itself important, revealing both the extraordinary complexity of intersocietal relationships through time and space and the importance accorded by the montagnards to religious criteria. There are three major “princédoms”—I will use Vincent’s term to refer to Durum, Wazang and Duvangar, in which she carried out most of her work—numerous smaller chiefdoms, some centered on inselbergs rising from the Diamaré plain, and four other atomized groupings located in the highlands where they have been less exposed to the states of the plains, whose depredations, principally slave-raiding, have been felt by the Mofu-Diamaré since at least the 18th century. The montagnards regard the Fulbe (Peuls) as their primordial enemies, although there must surely have been an earlier phase in which the main threat was the Wandala state.

While the refuge character of the Mandara highlands has been overemphasized, small scale migrations of culturally and linguistically related groups from eastern inselbergs to the mountains contributed to Mofu-Diamaré political evolution, and especially to its latest phase, the development of princédoms. The processes of their emergence are told in myths and legends, initially involving immigrants who by generosity, trickery or main force “tame” and subject earlier primitive occupants, taking over and subsequently expanding their domains. Vincent attempts with considerable success to decode these symbolic expressions of historical events, which are also manifested in regalia and in the progressive, quarter by quarter, implantation of clans. I do however have doubts about the chronology, going back to the 16th century and based upon the generational succession of princes, that she tentatively proposes. Despite the ideal of inheritance by primogeniture, there is far too much direct father to son transmission of rulership in the precolonial period to be convincing. The dates proposed are reasonable but cannot be substantiated even by the battery of ethnological approaches employed. Independent confirmation, possibly by archaeology, is required.

In Part II Vincent focusses on the exterior signs of power, the prince’s “castle” located on a summit above the houses of his subjects, and his remarkable polygamy, undertaken not to cement alliances but rather, sustained by a meat and beer diet, to increase the numbers of his clan. A prince of Duvangar who died in 1988 begat 209 children on his 44 wives. However the very size of the chiefly clan, vital for the maintenance of power and the stratification of the “gens du prince” over the “gens de rien,” members of other clans, carries with it seeds of discord. Competition between branches of the chiefly clan for land and power leads to warfare and expulsion of the defeated. The prince also has rights to corvée labour, most notably of the class of male initiates, and to a wide variety of services and goods that in the past included slaves. The amount of ethnographic information presented is tremendous, as can be gauged by the 28 pages describing the three stage, twelve year, process of initiation. The prince—toujours jeune!—is an honorary member of the class.

Among the prince’s responsibilities are regulation of the ceremonial and agricultural calendars, ensuring that the tutelary spirits of the hills, into which are gradually incorporated those of the ancestors, are propitiated, and that the
land is cleansed of impurity. He exerts control over both the production and consumption of the staple millet, and has ultimate rights—though these are normally devolved to chiefs of quarters—over the territory of the chieftdom, apportioning land to migrants. Vincent argues for the political rather than religious nature of his rule over land and agriculture. The dispensing of justice is another princely duty, carried out with, but not subject to, the advice of respected elders. In former times the prince held power of life and death. He was also strategist in the endemic, stylized, fratricidal wars between polities in this densely populated, land-hungry region, never fighting himself but present at the battlefield.

Part II ends with a discussion of other holders of power. These include hereditary heads of quarters and the prince’s courtiers, of whom, surprisingly, there are usually only two, the senior representing the autochthones and with important religious responsibilities, the second acting rather as the prince’s squire. Only one title appears indigenous; others—slagama, kaygama, gur-pala—are of Wandala, Bornoan or unknown origin. It is entirely typical of the Mandara that, in the process of borrowing, these titles and their duties have become disassociated and vary from group to group. Other categories of power holders considered include the mbidila, diviners and smiths, and assemblies of elders at both quarter and village level, who may in times of drought organize marches on the prince to demand rain, vandalizing the chateau and beating up members of his family to the extent of drawing blood.

Part III, the heart of the book, takes us into Mofu political theory and symbolism. The prince, no ordinary mortal, “is” the land, the rain, the leopard. Hedged about by taboos and clothed in symbols, he represents permanence, never really dies, and climbs unaided into his tomb. Yet he is no divine king. Vincent insists, claiming that he (I infer in his person) exercises no direct influence on the well-being of his princedom. He is however responsible for the cults of the senior genius loci and of the “corporation” of princely ancestors that mediate between a distant high god and humans. Vincent provides us with the best account to date of Mandara theology and the supernatural.

Above all the prince controls the rain, manipulating stones to call it, and another, more frightful, to stop it. This stone, kept buried much as a nuclear reactor is insulated from the world, is the chief’s ultimate sanction against those whom he wishes to punish. It is the combination, unusual in the Mandara, of chiefly roles as “lord of the mountain” and “lord of the rain” that can most nearly account for the concentration of power in the hands of the Mofu prince. And, as Vincent shows, this is a relatively recent development. In one further assimilation, the prince is also the leopard, the king of beasts and the symbol of raw power, who inspires fear in his people and who growls even at the anthropologist.

Each section of each chapter ends with a survey of variation within the Mofu-Diamaré, and in her conclusion Vincent first seeks to explain the disparities of power between the southern princes and the northern priest-chiefs.

She sees the development of political power as the consequence of migrations from the eastern plains that resulted in a quantum increase in clan heterogeneity within settlements, but at the same time introduced new politico-religious ideas for coping with such situations. The emergence of princedoms was a process of negotiation, contestation and struggle—in which personalities of
chiefs were not inconsequential—successive stages of which can be identified historically. The most critical and original element in the process was, as noted above, annexation by a religious leader of magical control over rainfall. An inevitable consequence was a progressive, though always limited, secularization of political power. This is disguised and re-presented by the negotiation of symbols, well explicated by the author, that constitutes the main Mofu-Diamaré discourse on the nature of power.

It is hard to do justice to the ethnographic richness of this monograph with its wealth of appendices, figures, tables and photographs. As one working in another chiefly polity, that of Sukur on the Nigerian side of the mountains, I was fascinated by the mutations and variations of common themes, drawn from a conceptual reservoir that is largely shared but variously exploited by the peoples of the Mandara. Although one must never assume the equivalence of any culture trait from one Mandara social formation to another, over and over again Vincent’s account throws light on puzzling aspects of Sukur behaviour.

I do wish that she had omitted the many casual comparisons with peoples from all over Francophone Africa that clutter the text, while more apposite reference to the, admittedly limited, literature in English on Mandara chiefdoms is lacking: Anthony Kirk-Greene on Sukur and especially James Vaughan on the Margi. Princes montagnards may disappoint some readers on account of its lack of structuralist synthesis, however the comprehensive and meticulous detail of the ethnography constitutes an open invitation to attempt such analyses. While there can be no question of Vincent’s ethnography replacing Jean-Yves Martin on the Mafa or Walter van Beek on the Kapsiki, we will be measuring ourselves against it for many years to come.

Nicholas David


Une notice biographique due à Pierre Gourou, complétée par une bibliographie, rappelle brièvement la carrière brillante et malheureusement écourtée par la mort de ce normalien géographe (1905-1946), auteur à 28 ans d’un livre sur l’Afrique noire, à 36 ans d’un premier livre sur la Syrie (Le pays de Alaouites), puis d’un second à 41 ans (Les paysans de Syrie et du Proche-Orient), sans parler d’une quarantaine d’articles.