

## **The Scope of Our Collective Challenge: Culture and Change in Bali Nyonga**

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“Man has no nature, what he has is....history.” Ortega Y Gasset, (History as a System).

### **Introductory Remarks**

Let me begin by thanking the executive of the BCA for inviting me as keynote speaker to this august event. I am deeply honoured to be invited to share some of my research findings and reflections for future inquiry with the Bali Cultural Association of which I am proud to be a member.

This afternoon, I wish to dedicate my address to an unassuming son of Bali Nyonga – a man who by vocation and passion remained a life student of Bali culture; whose curiosity and zeal to preserve our cultural legacy inspired him to research and write about our folk tales, names, and common rituals. This man was by every indication, humble of heart but noble in mind. It is he who inspired and directed me to pursue the kind of ethnographic research I carry out today. This man was my late father John Koyela Fokwang.

The challenge of documenting and preserving our cultural legacy is a task that is imperative and urgent. If we conjecture that the Bali kingdom settled its current site in the 1850s, then it follows

that the grassfields has been our home for about 160 years. During this period, we have documented about 110 years of our history, most of this, authored by German and subsequently British expatriates. Indeed, it is thanks to missionaries, colonial administrators and of course, anthropologists that we have written accounts of our cultural legacy. Without these sources, we would, in all probability, have had far less than we celebrate today in print. It is upon the shoulders of these women and men of letters that we “native scholars” must stand today to weave, and preserve our civilization for posterity.

Every human group owes it to itself to pass on its civilization to successive generations. We know from basic sociology that in order for every social system to survive, certain “functional imperatives” must be met – namely adaptation to one’s environment, goal attainment, integration and pattern maintenance. Our present generation is more equipped than ever before to galvanize our efforts, thanks to new technologies and the ever transforming mediascape to document, analyse and store for posterity, our collective heritage.

Thus, the task of the native intellectual, the artists, indigenous medical practitioners, etc is greater than ever before – for ahead, lies the burden of weaving together different shreds and shades of our cultural inheritance for local consumption, not just for future generations of Bali citizens, but also for global consumers – for as it is, we live in a global village whereby the globe should be understood as a marketplace of cultures competing for visibility and survival. It is in this respect that today, I will talk about the importance of celebrating and promoting our language, names, history and customs while modifying those that have, contrary to the spirit of culture, instead caused us pain and shame.

But how can we effectively trace our tracks without acknowledging in part or whole the wealth of written documents about our cultural inheritance currently at our disposal? As I said earlier, many have written about culture in Bali and even though the bulk of these authors have been foreigners, we must celebrate them, in the hope that their accomplishments will inspire our own people to research, document and preserve aspects of our collective heritage. It is in this light that I'd like to begin by recognising the authors, both foreign and native, that have contributed to "Bali Studies".

Some of the earliest written accounts about the Bali Nyonga people in particular and the Chamba in general were by the famous German explorer, Dr Eugen Zintgraff (1895). Regrettably, his works are inaccessible to many researchers schooled in the Queen's language. Another written account that has shed light on early 20th century Bali is by a colonial administrator known as W. E. Hunt, who, judging by his work, received elementary training in ethnology. I will make reference to some of his observations in my talk. Suffice to say at this point that his account sheds tremendous light on the social and cultural conditions in Bali in the mid-1920s, probably just over 60 or so years following Bali settlement of their present site. This implies that some of those living at the time constituted a small measure of the populations that had migrated from the Adamawa regions and had now taken on "Bali" identity.

One of the most respected sources of our cultural legacy comes from none other than two formidable English women - Dr Phyllis Kaberry (anthropologist) and Mrs Elizabeth Chilver (Historian – who is now about 105 years old) and their intellectual offspring (Richard Fardon).

Their story is a remarkable one which would make for an entire talk but suffice to state at this point that Kaberry and Chilver have provided us with some of the most sophisticated description and analysis of our political and cultural institutions which should be essential reading for every Bali citizen worth the name (see Kaberry and Chilver 1961). Recent anthropological literature on the Bali Chamba have been published by anthropologists trained by or inspired by Kaberry and Chilver – for example, Richard Fardon has a couple of book-length publications on the Chamba (Fardon 1988 ; 1990) and his latest titled *Lela in Bali* was published just 4 years ago; see Fardon (2006).

I should also pay homage to a few of our own people, many of whom have devoted their sweat and resources towards the critical analysis and description of our culture. It is thanks to these individuals that I think a foundation of the native anthropology of Bali Nyonga culture rests. One of the earliest attempts in this regard was a publication in 1978 titled “*The Living Culture of Bali Nyonga*” (1978) by Elias Nwana, Augustine Ndangam and David Nti. These respected individuals have collaborated in many other ways to produce and publish relevant literature on our culture (Nwana and Ndangam 1981a ; 1981b). See for instance the publication edited by Vincent Titanji, Mathew Gwanfogbe, E M Nwana, Augustine Ndangam & Adolf Lima (1988) titled, *An Introduction to the Study of Bali-Nyonga (A tribute to His Royal Highness Galega II, Traditional Ruler of Bali-Nyonga from 1940-1985)*. My own father, the late John K Fokwang, a teacher by vocation and pioneer researcher on Chamba names has bequeath to posterity, “*A Dictionary of Popular Bali Names*” (1992) whose third edition will be published in a couple of weeks. I would also like to acknowledge Dr Ndifontah Nyamndi’s (2007 ; 1988) remarkable historical analysis of Bali Chamba migration and politics and most recently, his

publication on the successive kings of Bali Nyonga since its founding to the present. Last year, I published a book titled *Mediating Legitimacy* (2009) which gives a comprehensive analysis of chieftainship in Bali against the backdrop of the wave of democratisation that swept through Cameroon and Africa in the 1990s.

### **On the Question of Culture**

Having paid tribute to these authors, let me now turn to the substance of what I have been invited to share with you today – namely to examine our cultural heritage and explore mechanism for its preservation and diffusion. It would make sense to begin this discussion by defining the ways in which culture is commonly understood. Most people tend to think of culture as a category of practice related to music, dance, art and perhaps fashion. For those who use culture in this sense, politics, law, economics, science etc, are not understood as constitutive of culture. Hence, it is fairly common to hear some of our people make references to how “rich” our culture is; or in certain cases with reference to outdated practices – how “bad” a particular culture is. Many also think of culture as synonymous to their ethnic identity – for instance when certain individuals refer to Bali culture, Nso culture, Kom culture etc etc.

Anthropologists understand culture to be a much broader concept. The most famous definition still used in introductory lessons is the one coined by English Anthropologist, E. B. Tylor (1871) as that “*complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society*” (Barfield 1997:98). This means that culture comprises those human traits that are learned and learnable and therefore are passed on socially, not biologically.

Now, some people tend to understand culture as bounded, fixed and unchanging. In fact when many ordinary folks talk about their “culture” one often gets the impression that reference is being made to an “unchanging and deeply bounded” understanding of culture. In so doing, these individuals tend to “essentialize” culture whereby current practices are said to be time “immemorial”. It should not also come as a surprise to many that the essentializing of culture is often invoked when “food” or some kind of material benefit is at stake. E.g. death celebration, bride wealth, etc.

Today, I offer you a slightly different understanding of culture – namely one that is unbounded, one that is constantly changing and adapting to new socio-economic conditions and of course, one that is not essentialised. Let me illustrate this point with a few examples from some of the literature at my disposal.

Writing at the end of 1925, the District Officer for the Bamenda Division, W. E. Hunt, prefaced his intentions to “present the old Bali habits, manners and beliefs in their purer form, stripped of the many extraneous and mongrel growths they have acquired in the Bamenda Division” (Hunt 1925). When he wrote his report, it is probable that many of the first generation of “settlers” were in their middle ages and despite this possibility, he expressed grave concerns about the reliability of the information he had acquired. *“It has not been an easy task”* he wrote, *“for so hybrid have become the present day customs that the younger generation are not to be relied upon as sources of information, while the number of elders who can claim to be repositories of aboriginal lore is fast-dwindling”* (Hunt 1925).

Now picture in your mind the following customary practices. If you lived 85 years ago, it would be most likely that, as a woman, you'll carry a Chamba tattoo (a frog-like figure) on your "forehead between the eyes and between the eye and ear". Hunt, who observed and recorded this practice conjectures that the tattoo represented a frog because he was privileged to see the Fon's gong<sup>1</sup> on which was engraved a number of frogs. Hunt states that the frog was a sacred totem to the Bali people because killing frogs at the time was tabooed. "The belief is that if a frog comes into your house, it brings fertility to your wife and good luck to you, and all Bali children are taught to do it no harm" (Hunt 1925:6).

Similarly, 85 years ago, Bali men decorated themselves with brass and toe rings and their women wore brass ear rings as well as a ring on the lower lip. Upon settling in the grassfields, camwood was adopted as a cosmetic ingredient by the Balis, an item completely unknown to their forebears.

Our practices have not only changed with respect to the ways we adorned ourselves in the past or with respect to our beliefs; change has also been witnessed in some of our cultural institutions. Take for example the Voma Cult. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century some of the functions of the Voma cult included the "ordering of the circumcision of boys" (Chilver and Kaberry 1967:69) but over time this role was discontinued. In those days, the collective circumcision of boys was generally associated with the formation of age-regiments, a pattern similar to certain ethnic groups in the Adamawa regions of Cameroon and Nigeria from which the Chamba migrated (cf. Barley 1986a ; Barley 1986b).

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<sup>1</sup> The gong is said to have belonged to Gawolbe and he reckoned it was over a hundred years old.

We have borrowed from surrounding communities (kingdoms) as much as we have been borrowed from. For instance, the Ngumba cult we know today was introduced in Fonyonga II's reign, by a notable who, according to Chilver and Kaberry (1967) had accompanied a German expedition to Bangwaland. According to these authors, the notable "returned with a pattern of organization (a double-set of seven officers), a set of bells and a set of chants and placed these at the disposal of Fonyonga II" (Chilver and Kaberry 1967:70). We are not by this statement implying that the Ngumba we have today is a replica of what came to us from Bangwaland. As in all cases of cultural exchange, some measure of adaptation and indigenisation must have taken place, giving it a rather unique and distinct identity.

Whilst change and cultural adaption are inevitable, we may also note certain continuities that have impacted and given shape to some of our customary practices. It is fair to say the present Bali population, like many other groups in the Grassfields, constitute what we may call a diaspora population. Diaspora, because historically, they trace their origins to another homeland, even if this reality is completely remote to present generations. Writing 85 years ago, Hunt remarked about a pattern that was as true to his time as it is today. He wrote: "***Today the young men seek in foreign adventure and trade the excitement that war formerly provided, and are to be found exploring other countries far from their homes***" (Hunt 1925:6). Certain things hardly change indeed. Here we are, about 10,000km away from our ancestral homeland embarking on a life of "foreign adventure and trade" even if the "push factors" have changed remarkably. But even when the conditions have changed, the same metaphors have remained resilient. "Falling Bush" is the metaphor of choice as we know – conveying the sense that we are out to harvest,

conscious of where our spoils must be repatriated to. But the concept of *bush* also conveys another meaning – namely the wild that must be tamed and for some – the site for a new homeland. It is in this sense that some people of Bali descent have chosen to make this side of the world their home, constituting in another sense, a Bali Diaspora Diaspora.

What I have sought to put into perspective in the preceding paragraphs is that “human groups, however defined, are shifting and uncertain.... People work actively upon what they have received in order to respond to present circumstances, and in so acting, change their cultural inheritance” (Barfield 1997:101).

This means that what we call our culture today would inevitably be modified a hundred or so years from now. Whatever we will hand over to the next generation, will be acted upon, modified as they see fit for their age, (adapted if you will) and serve them for as long as they see such patterns useful. Therefore, culture was invented to serve mankind, not the other way round.

But in certain cases, we have opted, perhaps, compelled by conservative forces in our society to “serve” culture – rather than be served by culture. If culture is man’s answer to nature – or mechanism of adapting to one’s environment, then we will inevitably see how absurd it is for us to surrender ourselves into the bondage of serving “culture”. I shall return to this matter a little bit later. But let me now turn to areas of our collective heritage that need to be celebrated, revived and marketed.

**Shall we Make or Mar?**

Socrates reminds us that a life unexamined is not worth living. In his footsteps, I will dare to say that a culture unexamined is not worth having! I am particularly inspired by Frantz Fanon's words which serve to introduce our collective responsibility in restoring pride in our cultural legacy. Frantz Fanon was a psychiatrist and anti-colonial freedom fighter. He is well known for having written on the psychological effects of colonial oppression on both the oppressor and the oppressed.

"Colonialism", he says, "is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it" (Fanon 1963:210).

"When we consider the efforts made to carry out the cultural estrangement so characteristic of the colonial epoch, we realize that nothing has been left to chance and that the total result looked for by colonial domination was indeed to convince the natives that colonialism came to lighten their darkness. The effect consciously sought by colonialism was to drive into the native's heads the idea that if the settlers were to leave, they would at once fall back into barbarism, degradation, and bestiality" (Fanon 1963:210-211).

**Language Use**

It is a fact that in precolonial times, the average native was bilingual, thanks to local and long-distance trade, interethnic marriage and the constant movement and merging of peoples of different linguistic expression. Nevertheless, we cannot deny the strategic importance of

colonising languages which have enabled diverse people within the same political community to express themselves – but in which process, many have come to look upon their own indigenous languages as uncouth, archaic and unfit for contemporary usage. Mungaka may not have suffered the same fate on account of its singular position as an adopted missionary language during the colonial era. But it is regrettable to note that despite the advances made by the Basel missionaries and their successors, relatively little has been done by us to promote the use of written Mungaka in our communities. Compare our nonchalance to the zeal other communities in Africa have shown in promoting their languages such as Fulfulde in Northern Cameroon, (Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba in Nigeria, Swahili, Tswana, Sotho etc in East and Southern Africa. (NB – Microsoft windows and Office software have been adapted to these languages for wide use – e.g. Swahili, Zulu, Tswana etc etc.)

We may be quick to defend ourselves by blaming postcolonial government policies that have remained nonchalant despite expert advice to the contrary on the developmental benefits of mother tongue usage. But we as a community ought to by-pass government and do justice to ourselves, as we have done in many community driven initiatives with respect to infrastructure development. How are we to excuse ourselves from future reproach – if we fail, despite our intellectual and material wealth, to build on what the Basel missionaries bequeath to us?

We already know that one of the biggest challenges facing parents in the diaspora is promoting the use of Mungaka in their homes (see Fielding 2009). This challenge is exacerbated by the absence of didactic materials. Strongly anglicized versions of Mungaka are also circulating in our communities here in North America as well as back in Cameroon. I am struck to learn that in

some Bali reunions in the USA, Mungaka is not upheld as the language of choice in conducting official business. (*I intend no irony here but dream of the day when speakers of my status will be proficient in written “Mungaka”*). A common excuse often advanced is that English should be used instead in order to accommodate everyone present, particularly those who do not speak or understand Mungaka. But the vexing question must be posed! When and where would those interested in learning the language learn it or assess themselves if public fora such as our “Nda kums” are not sites for the use of our language?

If visitors came to my neighbourhood in Toronto, they would be amazed that Asian children walking the streets of what I now fondly call Hausa Quarters in Toronto – speak their native languages. Without exaggerating, you will hardly hear a word uttered in the English language but these kids are also very proficient in spoken and written English. Asian migrants have also set up private schools in their neighbourhoods where their children are sent – after regular school - to be instructed in their languages. Is there anything we can learn from these people – so proud of their heritage?

I know I run the risk of insinuating that ethnic identity and pride in our heritage can only be expressed in language. I am not trying to essentialise our identity. We all understand that language is the vehicle through which every culture must transmit itself and I will therefore spare the audience a revisit of the debates. Let me instead offer you some food for thought as to how we can begin to deal with our language issue.

1. First, we need a **Bali Language Society** who, like the Academie Francaise, would be tasked with redesigning the written form and orthography of Mungaka. In Fon Ganyonga

III, we have a leader well schooled and positioned to scout for interested individuals willing and ready to take up this challenge.

2. We must aim to publish children's books and other didactic materials in Mungaka which will significantly encourage the use of this language in our homes. In the absence of these materials, parents are encouraged to prepare basic literature with the names of common animals, birds, and household items. Three years ago, my wife obtained a children's book of common birds, animals and fruits. Ingenious as the authors were, the photos had no labels leaving her with the option of writing out the names of these items in Mungaka which she read out every evening to our son. Today, Gima is admired in my community for his exceptional bilingualism, which I hope will continue into his adulthood.

### **On the Subject of Our Names**

I think the language question inevitably leads me to the next issue I wish to highlight in my discourse – namely the question of our names. Without being polemic about this issue, I would like to wonder aloud; how many people of European descent have gladly chosen African names for their children? During colonial times, it became fashionable, perhaps mandatory to take on Mission names precisely for the purposes of baptism. It would seem that God had disowned or rejected our own names. About a century later, many of the Christian Churches (particularly the Catholic Church) that held this position have modified their rules by accepting that African names that were not contrary to the spirit of Christianity can be accepted as baptismal names.

Like Fanon says, colonialism, thanks to its perverted logic has successfully distorted, disfigured, and destroyed our sense of pride in our names. There are many in our communities and in this

gathering who think it is imperative to bear a Christian or Western name as one's First name—banishing our indigenous names (to a middle-name) – as the proper order of things. Many understand this as the “Kontri” name. There are also those, who, having done the requisite soul-searching, tend to celebrate our heritage and its pride in giving exclusive indigenous names to their off-spring. Whatever the reasons individuals may advance as a justification for the names they choose for their offspring, we need to promote and defend as a people, the use of our names. If we can't do this for ourselves, who else would do it? It is precisely in this light that we welcome the interest many individuals have shown in researching Bali names, pioneered by my late father. Many others are researching and intend to publish their own dictionaries of Bali names – a trend we must celebrate. Doesn't the English language have countless dictionaries of Names?

### **Wedding Names**

In addition to names acquired at birth, one area that needs the full glamour in the use of our names should be in the area of wedding names. [How many women married to Bali men in this gathering have a wedding name?] We have some of the most beautiful and romantic wedding names available on the planet; Nahyella, Sadmia, Nahsalla etc. But it seems to me we have relented as a people in promoting these names and the rituals that accompany such wonderful events.

### **Our History**

Whatever happened to the “History Committee of Bali Nyonga”? Do you know that over 45 ethnic groups were brought as slaves to the Americas and of these groups the Chamba are listed

among the 10 top groups<sup>2</sup>? Relatively few Bali natives know their history, most of which have been passed on by oral accounts. Except for Ndifontah Nyamndi's "*A Political History of Bali Chamba*" we have few or no other well-researched written accounts by indigenous historians about our people. In the 1960s when Kaberry and Chilver carried out an in-depth ethnographic and historical study of Bali Nyonga political institutions, there existed an association known as the History Committee of Bali Nyonga. This is not the place to reiterate how strategic this society was for the debate and diffusion of Bali history. It was to this society that Kaberry and Chilver frequently turned in order to assess and corroborate new data about our history. I would like to see BCA spearhead the revival of this society and would like to call on sons and daughters of Bali Nyonga to support the establishment of a journal series on Bali Historical Studies covering all aspects of our history.

Whilst a lot of focus has been placed on our migration history or the evolution of our political institutions, very little has been done on our social and economic history. What about a history of Bali music, medicine, arts and aesthetics etc? I would certainly like to see more written accounts about social change in Bali since colonial times to the present. I am honoured to say Dr Kehbuma Langmia and I are currently working on an edited volume that may give life to this perspective. Ma Patience Fielding's (2009) recently published article on Mungaka use among diaspora Bali citizens will be included in this book.

I am particularly inspired by a concept I'd like to call "auto-history" by which I mean the detailed histories of our various families, lineages and sub-chiefdoms. Individuals within each family should take up the challenge in researching their family history from settlement in the late

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<sup>2</sup> See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atlantic\\_slave\\_trade](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atlantic_slave_trade)

19<sup>th</sup> century to the present. You will be amazed how specific lineage histories will enrich our collective history as a people. Who for instance has cared to write about the history of the Tikali people, Buti, Sang, Ngiam etc.? If indeed such literature is available, can we as an association explore mechanisms to disseminate them?

Let me illustrate the example of auto-history with a personal initiative. I am currently collecting data on the history of the Kungwe people, after which the quarter known as Njenka Kungwe is named. Now, preliminary data shows that Kungwe was a royal exile from Kumja in Ti country. He had sought refuge in Bali on account of a coup d'etat against him. He arrived Bali in the 1890s with a few of his brothers and supporters and received warm welcome from Galega I who in turned first settled him at Fuhtein and eventually in the area known today as Njenka Kungwe/Kundu. There, he held the position of quarter-head and enjoyed royal privileges until his death.

My fellow country men and women; history is absolutely important – even for its own sake. We as a people should know this better than any other group in the contemporary grassfields. A famous author once claimed that “Man has no nature, what he has is....history” and he dared to add that the historian should be seen as a “retrospective prophet”. I would like to see the coming into force of a Chamba History or Heritage Month, similar to the Black History Month which we celebrate annually around the globe in countries like the UK, Canada and the USA. It is indeed, long overdue. We need a Chamba History Month. Lastly, we need an archive, a repository of our collective knowledge. Many in the grassfields have already set up museums in royal palaces but no one has bothered to think of running an archive which may compete favourably or outshine

the present government run archives. We need an archive to store all the assessment reports about our peoples from successive colonial administrators as well as other vital documents we may see fit to be stored at such a prestigious site. Bali Nyonga would be a pacesetter if we explored the possibility of creating a Royal Bali Archive.

### **Widowhood**

I would like to end my talk by addressing one of the most shameful customary practices that remains a scourge to our advancement as a civilization – namely the kinds of ways we treat the vulnerable in our society and in particular, the question of widowhood. I address myself to this gathering because I am deeply conscious of the fact that many widows are present among us and can detail firsthand what they have gone through, probably at the most painful moments of loss. I address myself to the august and proud people of Bali who celebrate their cultural prestige with much fanfare.

I have been researching the subject of widowhood for the last 4 years and held interview sessions at the palace with the Fon and some of his closest advisers, clergymen and several women who have been subjected to the practices of widowhood, whose details I would not recount. My preliminary findings reveal that our kings, dating from the era of Galega II had disowned and condemned the treatment of widows in Bali Nyonga as far back as the 1970s. Religious groups and Ganyonga III have issued statements in recent times urging Bali women to desist from the cruel practices that inform our idea of mourning for a deceased husband. Collectively, we tend to say that the “fon” is the custodian of our culture. In many ways, he is, thanks to the advice he receives from numerous councillors and royal institutions. If the fon has disowned these

practices as non-Bali, perhaps, anti-Bali, how do we as a people continue to allow these practices to continue unabated in our community? What have we done as an association to fight this scourge? Where is the outrage? What have we done besides voicing our condemnation in private or public?

A hundred years from now, future generations may be reluctant to look upon us with kindness on account of our failure to tackle this social problem head-on. They will ask – where were the sons and daughters of Bali Nyonga when women suffered for so long in the name of custom? I asked earlier if we were born to serve culture or to be served by culture? What for instance has the culture committee of the BCA done to raise this issue to its top five priorities?

Whilst the palace has put in place a catalogue of sanctions that will be meted out to offenders, it is my conviction that we need to do more in the form of education. We also need a permanent body (or empower existing ones) charged with the monitoring of customary practices that subject free citizens to abuses of all sorts. Together with the royal palace, we as a people owe it to ourselves and future generations to stamp out cultural practices that cannot be gladly exported – practices that do not promote and celebrate happiness. In order to build a culture of love and charity, we must weed out the old and ring in the new. We must unite our strengths and aspirations to build a society that beams out cultural practices that are admired and borrowed by surrounding communities and why not parts of the global community? Until such a day comes, we would remain our own worst enslavers.

This, country men and women of good will, is my challenge to the Bali people at home and abroad. Thank you all and enjoy the rest of the convention.

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