PAST PASSAGES: INITIATION RITES ON THE ADAMAWA PLATEAU (CAMEROON)[1]

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During the 1960s in the northern Cameroon, the Nyam-Nyam (or Nizaa) performed rites of passage, where boys were circumcised and underwent lengthy initiation rites. Since the rituals are no longer performed, several occasions are described and the question of their demise is examined. (Rites of passage, circumcision, identity, Nyam-Nyam/Nizaa, Cameroon)

Reference to rites of passage embodies the cultural complexity of change and stability. In van Gennep's (1960) formulation, these consisted of rituals of separation, transition, and incorporation, "ceremonies whose essential purpose is to enable the individual to pass from one defined situation to another," (van Gennep 1960:3) whether in the life-cycle, moving individuals from one age status to another, or in establishing membership statuses in organizations. Their function, however, pertains to the status quo, legitimizing the structure of cultural beliefs and social practices. Where rites identify a change from youth to adult, the public recognition, knowledge learned, and expectations are part of an identity transformation that also perpetuates the rites from one generation to the next. This interpretation applies even where the emphasis is on the liminal (van Gennep 1960:11), or what Victor Turner (1969:96–97) called a time of anti-structure, being out of the natural order of what is considered to be society, thereby signifying that the natural order exists.

Since the emphasis in these formulations is ultimately on social stability, what are the consequences when the rites are no longer performed? On the one hand, "one of the characteristics of the modern world is the disappearance of any meaningful rites of initiation" (Eliade 1958:ix). On the other, according to Kimball (1960), "[t]here is no evidence that a secularized urban world has lessened the need for ritualized expression of an individual's transition from one status to another" (Kimball 1960:xvii). While Eliade suggests that initiation rites have lost whatever functions were performed by them in pre-modern conditions, Kimball sees some enduring need for them to be performed, albeit in different ways and forms.

The Nyam-Nyam (NN) or Nizaa, also referred to as Nyem-Nyem and Niam-Niam, provide a case study for examining this problem. They reside in Galim on the Adamawa Plateau in the Republic of the Cameroon. During the mid-1960s, I observed them perform initiation rites, or what La Fontaine (1986:102) refers to as "maturity rites." Some years later, Norwegian linguists attached to the Norwegian Missionary Society began to study the NN in

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Galim, who now prefer to be identified as Nizaa (Endresen 1990/1991, 1999; Kjelsvik 2002, 2008). Kjelsvik's research in Galim in 2005 and 2006 documented the many ways Galim had changed since 1992–1999, when she was a missionary worker on the Nizaa language project (Kjelsvik 2008:63). Today, houses are built in rectangular shape with metal roofs rather than in round forms with thatch roofs. Schools and a state hospital have been built, and the social and political integration of the Nizaa in northern Cameroon has continued apace with the acquisition of Fulfulde as a primary language and of Islam as the dominant religion.

Most relevant to the topic of this paper, male circumcision remains a universal requirement for adulthood, but with important changes, such as "the lower age for circumcision and the detachment of the circumcision proper from an initiation ceremony after a period of seclusion" (Kjelsvik 2008:127), a detachment similar to other northern Cameroun societies, such as the Gbaya (Burnham 1980:63). Kjelsvik provides oral histories of the ceremony that faithfully recall the descriptions provided in this paper. One point of difference, however, is the explanation for the floggings. One of her interlocutors interpreted the floggings as "a punishment for all transgression the child had made from the age of about seven years" (Kjelsvik 2008:129). What is described here connects the initiates' beatings to the achievement of manhood, to which the ceremony is directed, and to the men as models of fortitude for the boys and to their desire to "play" with one another.

This article addresses the question of NN identity and the role of the initiation rites. Did the NN lose their identity with their name, in assimilating to Islam and Christianity? What factors might explain a transformation of their identity in the absence of initiation rites?

BACKGROUND

The NN name is somewhat of an academic mystery. They were well identified in the literature (Lacroix 1952, Mohamadou 1965), though Grimes (2000:52) claims they also refer to themselves as Baghap. Grimes (2000) subsumes Nizaa along with Ssuga, Galim, Nyamnyam, Njemnjem, and Jemjem under the linguistic category of Suga (Grimes 2000:52). "Niza [sic] is also referenced on a map, situating them north of Banyo" (Gausset 1999:258). During my fieldwork, no one referred to them by these terms. Only one man said he believed the original name for his people was Nizohk, but everyone else agreed that it was Nyam-Nyam.

Government publications, including linguistic maps and censuses, placed the NN in the chiefdom of Galim and its eponymous largest settlement. It surely must be coincidental that the Azande, located in the Sudan, were also referred to as Nyam-Nyam. In Fulfulde, the language of the Fulani, who

continued their West African conquests to the Adamawa region in the early 1800s (Mohammadou 1981:242), *nyam-nyam* means "to eat," inferring that people so called were cannibals. The NN recognized that this name had been attributed to them, but accepted it as an historic definition of defiance. In their terms, the name referred to their stealing and "eating" Fulani cattle while besieged on the nearby mountains, but never defeated. According to their oral history, they had emigrated to the area as separate clans from dispersed settlements and had come together on the mountain in self-defense when the Fulani attacked on horseback (also see Lacroix 1952:30; Mohamadou 1965:53). After the German and then French colonial regimes came to dominate the region, the NN returned to their earlier settlements and to Galim proper in 1918 (Dognin 1981:146) where a NN was ensconced as a *lamido* (Fulfulde word for the head chief) and, with the trappings of Fulani royalty, became the official head of the chiefdom.

Galim contained the large compound of the lamido, a regional market, a mosque, and a school. A Norwegian Christian mission was established just outside of town. The NN retained houses in Galim, as well as near their farms. As farmers and administrators in Galim, they had economic relations with Hausa, Fulani, and other ethnic groups, and with Mbororo herders in the countryside who exchanged the products of their herds for agricultural produce. With Fulfulde the lingua franca, older NN took this as a sign of losing their language, even though a NN was the lamido and the NN played an important economic role in the chiefdom (Leis 1970). With the independence of the Cameroon in 1960, the role of the lamido continued as it had during the colonial period and was subjugated at the national level in ways similar to the political processes found with indirect rule of colonial powers.

Galim is approximately 200 km from Ngaoundere—the largest town in the region—but since there was no direct or adequate roadway, driving between the two took at least a half day. The geographical isolation was increased by the mountain range to the west, forming the border with Nigeria. The 1955/57 census recorded a population of 5,961 NN in Chefferie de Galim, Arrondissement de Tignere (Institut de Recherches Scientifiques du Cameroun 1965:5)[2] In the 1963–'64 census the population of Galim was 6,410; the NN numbering almost half, followed by the Fulani with a population close to 2,000 (Census Registry,[3] Tignere 1965). More than 16 other ethnic groups made up the total. Within Galim, extended patrilocal families occupied houses in walled enclosures. Outlying communities were similarly organized, with NN hamlets interspersed among Mbum, Pere (formerly called Koutine), and neighboring Mbororo who migrated seasonally with their cattle and lived in temporary camps near the hamlets.

Initiation rites drew participants from these hamlets. Boys between the ages of 7 and 15 could be circumcised at any time. An uncircumcised boy was referred to as *yaa*; following circumcision, during the three months of seclusion, he was *dompe* (*dompee*),[4] and on release he was *kwa*. During seclusion a boy could choose another name to prefix his own, such as *nza, ndam, ndoam* (*ndwam*), and *nzoam* (*nzwam*). No special name designated the circumcision group, nor did they have a special relationship with each other, although one man offered that they recognized their shared experience by residing with each other when visiting one another's villages. During the year, I observed one circumcision ceremony and three ceremonies performed after the boys returned from the bush.

The Ceremony at Mayo Kari[5]

At a little after 8 o'clock in the morning of February 15, 1966, I left for Mayo Kari with my NN assistant and two porters to observe a circumcision *gorr* (*gor*) ceremony. Mayo Kari is a long river with many hamlets of the same name stretched out on a ridge overlooking the valley. During the rainy season, a canoe is needed to cross the river. The valley floods help fertilize the fields of maize.

Bara, the sponsor of the ceremony, had prepared a large amount of maize beer for those participating in the ceremony, and so was referred to as *nvuta* (*mvúú táá*) "father of the beer," but beer and food were also on sale for visitors. In neighboring areas, such as Garbaya or Wogomdu, food and beer were provided freely. At Bara's hamlet, a group of approximately ten circular mud-walled, thatched-roof huts, around 20 men had gathered and were drinking beer. One of the "notables" (respected elders) was sitting on a bench off to one side. He said that 24 boys were "in the bush," and that they came from different villages. Bara's son, Garraya, was among them. The men prepared to visit the boys, who had been circumcised, and after a lengthy discussion over allowing a stranger to view them, I was permitted to accompany them.

The boys were located a short distance from the village, across the river, which at that time of the year was only a trickle. The boys, their heads shaved, were sitting in a line next to each other, and behind each of them was a *gwar* (*gwàr or gwèè*) "guardian." The guardians all appeared to be men in their 20s. The boys were naked; each boy's penis was tied in leaves, and a string around their waists was attached to the penis so that it was held up.

Their wounds had been washed with a filtered mixture of corn cob ashes and water. The boys sat with their knees up and their hands in front of them, clasped together or on their heads to avoid touching their penises. The only times the boys did not clasp their hands together was when they were clapping. They were told to clap when a notable approached. They were also instructed

to clap at various times during the ceremony and to change the sound of the clap by cupping their hands.

Men were sitting and drinking at the place where the boys had slept since the operation. The circumciser, *soubwa* (*sùùɓwaa*), said that he was helped with the circumcisions by two or three other men. The boys had been circumcised on an afternoon two days earlier. All the foreskins had been cut off and then simply buried. The wounds were wrapped in a leaf without any medicine being added. The boys could eat anything during this three day period except salt, which was believed to interfere with the wound healing. The boys appeared to range in age from around 6 to 11 years old. The soubwa said that none of the boys had cried. If they had, he said they would have been yelled at but they would not have been beaten. During the three-day period, the boys remained sitting as just described, and during the night, fires were built in front of them to keep them warm. Periodically, the men came from the village to dance in front of them, to drink alongside them, and to constantly make sure that the boys did not open their wounds by moving or touching the penis. The only prohibition placed upon himself, the soubwa said, was to not sleep with a woman prior to the circumcision; otherwise the wounds would not heal. The payment for his service was three large jugs of beer from each boy's father. They were to be given to him at the end of the three-month period when the boys return from their seclusion.

After I inspected the boys, at the request of the men, the men proceeded to dance for me. They moved in a circle; some beat gongs, and others blew on cow horns or short reeds. One of the men proceeded to make the motions of intercourse while dancing, which made the others laugh. The men danced with much enthusiasm, and as the day went on, more men joined in.

That night the men danced where the circumcised boys were located, and there were shouts, which were to help the guardians stay awake. They had to make sure that the boys did not disturb their wounds in their sleep. The next morning before sunrise, the dancers went to the hamlet and danced as they had danced the previous day, except that there were many more men involved and much more activity. The men jumped up and down and made motions at one another as though they were going to fight. Part of this jumping seemed intended to keep them warm, because it was very cold in the morning. Women observed this dance too. After about a half hour, the men danced to where the circumcised boys were, and beer was taken to them.

Around 7 o'clock in the morning, Bara and several men made a dam to block the stream sufficiently for the boys to be bathed. Bara also made sure there was enough beer for the men. The circumcised boys were sitting near where they had been the previous day, except that the shelter constructed of leaves and bushes to keep the sun off them was gone. To one side, a man was

making several whips out of native cords; other men were weaving grass skirts.

The soubwa announced that he was not going to wash the boys because he had not received his payment, which consisted of 100 francs[6] and a rooster from each of the boys. Their guardians ignored him and proceeded to dress themselves. They took off their shirts and pulled grass skirts over their pants. Each took two sticks, the bark of which had been removed, and proceeded to dance in a line in circles, kneeling to clap their hands. The young men were showing the circumcised boys what they were supposed to do later in the day.

Around 9 o'clock, the circumcised boys were led to the river. They always kept the same order as they moved about, keeping Bara's son at the head of the line. They walked one way, and then swung around in a counter-clockwise or clockwise direction. Several men, including the soubwa and his helpers, went below the dam and sat on large rocks that were dry. The men formed three groups and placed ground-up bark in small piles in front of each group. Each boy was led to one of the groups and then back to the upper side of the dam where he had been. The boys were constantly instructed by their guardians during the ceremony and told to keep their eyes down in a subservient, respectful fashion when they approached older men. As each boy was led to the group of men, he knelt, with his guardian beside him, and placed both of his hands on his head. The guardian took a pinch of the bark and touched the head of each of the men in the group as well as their right hand, each time saying, "Bad luck should leave you, good luck should come." The guardian then placed the bark in another little pile, took the right hand of his ward and had him do as he had just done. The boy's left hand remained on his own head, and when this was done, all the boys lined up again. This bark was *yim*, a general term for "medicine," and believed to have the power to give a man good luck and chase away bad luck.

After the boys were lined up, the soubwa and another man took the whips that had been woven earlier, held them over their heads, and then hit each other twice with great force. After this, the young men took off their shirts and proceeded to get whipped twice. The men whipped each other vigorously, raising welts on their chests and backs. They threw out their chests proudly and appeared to try hard not to wince when struck. One man, who was ill, was touched lightly with the whip. The men said the boys were instructed not to cry. The beating, they said, was to strengthen their moral fortitude, to know right and wrong. One man drew an analogy to military training. Like soldiers being taught to be obedient, so too, boys are whipped to make certain that as adults they will show deference to their elders.

After many men had been beaten, the boys and their guardians came forward and ran through a line of eight men, four on each side, who hit the

boys with small sticks or branches, vigorously or lightly according to their height; the tallest ones received good whacks, while the younger and shorter ones were merely touched with the whips. The men who had been beaten previously took off their clothes and washed themselves in the pool that had been created by the dam. The guardians took the boys into the water, removed the leaves from their penises, and washed them thoroughly. While examining the wounds, the men said encouraging things to the boys. One man took out his penis to show how the wound would heal. Following their baths, the boys' penises were again tied with leaves. Meanwhile, the older men had gone upstream to bathe in privacy. The boys were lined up again and had their penises inspected closely. Several started to faint. A man poured water on their heads, and then beat a gong to awaken them. The men stressed that the pain was to be endured. As each boy was whipped again, the men carefully watched to see how the boys responded. Several grimaced, but not one cried.[7]

The men whipped each other, one explained, to show the newly circumcised boys that this was manly. Another said that he was whipped because he had spent the night with the boys in the bush, and all those who had participated in the ceremony, except the elders, had to do this. The boys were then led up the bank of the river again, but not to where they had sat previously. There they sat on leaves and waited for their food, while several of the men went to drink beer.

A few hours later, around 11 o'clock, the boys were dressed the way the young men had been dressed earlier in the morning. Leaves were tied around their waists and each was given two sticks to hold. These represented spears.[8]

After the boys were dressed, they walked in a line around the back of the hill until they were opposite the hamlets. They were lined up with their backs to the hamlets, and their guardians shielded them from the people who had come from the hamlets to watch, including all their mothers, other women, and several of the elders who had returned earlier from the stream. The women were told not to approach too closely. A man shouted from the women's side, "I lost my child, have you seen him?" The soubwa came forward and shouted, "No I haven't seen him." The man replied, "You must look and tell me if you see him." The soubwa said he would do so, and asked, "How long has the boy been lost?" The man replied, "Three days now." The soubwa then put one of the boys forward and asked, "Is this the boy?" The man said, "No." The soubwa then said, "I haven't seen him." The man replied, "Look again. If you find him, there will be a gift." "What will you give me as a gift?" asked the soubwa. The man said, "I will clap my hands." Soubwa responded with, "I don't want you to fool me. I saw the footsteps of a boy and I will search for him." After saying this, the guardians stepped away from the boys, and they were seen by the people on the other side. The soubwa then

shouted, "Are these the boys?" A man on the other side shouted "Yes!" and the women shrilled and clapped. The boys proceeded to clap while kneeling and then danced in a circle in the same way as the young men had done earlier in the morning. The boys then went to where they had been after they were washed and had their leaves removed. They then left for huts in the bush near their respective villages and took their leaves with them. After three months, they would return to complete the ceremonies.

Transition

The period of seclusion was described by several men at different times.[9] The boys build shelters near their villages. Those circumcised together are friends (*nikwamum* [*niikwamum*]) ("man with whom you entered bush"). There is one *gwegiu* (*gwɛ̀ɛ̀gìw*), "older guardian," for each group of boys from the same village. The boys are not allowed to see women, but their meals are prepared by their mothers, or, in some cases, a father's sister, and men carry the food to them. The "secrets" of the circumcision, which are not supposed to be discussed with uncircumcised males, are the gourds (*saafi*) used for trumpeting and the instructions given by the guardians during the period of seclusion.

The father of a boy to be circumcised asks a friend to be the guardian of his son during the circumcision period. The term for guardian, gwar, is reciprocal—a guardian refers to his ward by the same term. It is also a kinship term, referring to a male's sister's husband. Guardians, however, say the correspondence has no significance. In fact, in-laws have a joking relationship with each other, whereas the relationship between a guardian and his ward should always be respectful. A boy gives his guardian a mat, called *kipagwer* (*kipààŋ gwàr*), which he makes during the seclusion period. For the following three months, the older guardians educate the boys on proper behavior, some of which has been expected of them from the age of two or three. This education consists of a boy keeping his eyes down, learning songs, and learning how to clap. If they lack this instruction, they will not demonstrate respect for elders. Furthermore, the boys are warned:

- You must work hard.
- When you see a notable carrying something, you should offer to carry it.
- In a gathering you should find a place for a notable to sit and find something to protect him from the sun.
- You should not play a lot with boys who are not circumcised.
- You must obey your mother and father.
- If too tired to obey them, you should not say "no" or argue; you should leave and be quiet.
- You should honor the man who was your guardian for circumcision.

•You must respect your guardian's wife. You should not speak to her on returning from the circumcision until you twice take a cup of beer and hand it to her to be filtered. You must also purchase a cloth for her, or if you are too young, your father will purchase a cloth for her. Then you can talk to her. [A guardian and his ward call each other *gwe* (*gwèè*), the term for "wife's brother" and "sister's husband." A boy is like a new wife to the guardian. He acts toward the guardian's wife like a co-wife. The guardian must take care of the boy, just as a man must take care of his wife. However, since the boy is not a woman, he cannot be called "wife." Yet, the boy addresses his guardian's wife as *yàáŋ*, "co-wife."]
•You should not insult a notable.
•You should not steal.
•You should not eat food prepared by a menstruating woman or enter her house. You should not sleep with a woman for three months after returning to your village to allow the wound to completely heal. When you have sex you should find a woman in a different place than where you live, and she will instruct you in the proper methods. Ordinarily you assume the top position, but this is not a requirement. You should not have sex with a woman during her period. In the villages a woman will always tell you when she has her period, but this is not always the case in Galim. If intercourse does take place during this time, you drink *yim kengw* (*kèŋw*), a medicine made of cucumber, water, certain leaves, and salt to make the body "cold" again.

Nothing was said about NN history, and there was no specific comment about the lamido, who was simply another one of the notables. Before leaving seclusion, each boy makes two mats as gifts upon returning to the site of the circumcision: one for his guardian and one for the circumciser. The secret of the gourds is revealed later.

Incorporation

Returning to Mayo Kari three months later in May 1966, I learned that it had been raining daily for the past week. Bara, who again sponsored the ceremony ("providing the beer"), had secretly hired a man to prevent the rain from continuing, and it was obvious he succeeded, as evidenced by the sunny weather.

There were 24 boys who had arrived the previous day and were resting in a house near Bara's village. In the past, the roof of this house would have been taken off during the night, and saafi would be blown to *sonchire* (*sóóŋcíré*) "educate" the boys. This word was constantly used during the next two days. A child is educated to make him *gengni* (*géŋní*) "wise." To make a child wise, the NN believe he should be beaten, and, during the circumcision period, whipped. From then on the boys will obey authority, for without a whipping, they would not behave properly.

The boys were led to Bara's hamlet around 2 p.m., arriving in single file, dressed in faded leaf skirts. A guardian walked beside each one and made sure the boy kept his eyes closed. The boys walked with either their own hands over their eyes, or those of the guardians. Three men with gourds (saafi)

followed. Other men walked with the boys. There was a good deal of hustling, and the men threw clumps of grass and dirt at the boys. The objective was to frighten ("educate") the boys with the combination of the sounds from the saafi and the objects being thrown at them.

The gourds are of different types: one is in the shape of a tumbler with one end open, and the other end has a small hole cut in it to provide a mouthpiece. Sometimes two of these are attached and can give a very loud noise. The boys were not supposed to know the sounds were coming from the gourds, but a few did not have their eyes closed. Also, gourds are played on public occasions, making it unlikely that the boys were unaware of the source of the sounds.

The boys sat in a circle with their feet inward, their guardians standing behind them. The men with the saafi went to fields nearby and returned in a rush to throw grass and dirt at the boys. The guardians protected the boys to some extent, but many of the objects hit them. The men shouted, and at the same time dirt was flying in all directions, creating a good deal of furor. The saafi were taken away to be hidden.

One man recalled that men had once passed by his hut blowing them, and he had walked out by mistake and seen them. The men were not angry with him, but he was given *mvubam* (*mvúúɓàm*) to drink. Despite the emphasis on being brave, many boys cry because older men frighten them by saying that one of the boys will be killed that day. They are told there is powerful medicine within the saafi, and they should say nothing about it to women in the village. If they do, they will not be allowed to participate again in any event with the saafi.

The boys were left sitting in the circle with a large amount of the debris that had been thrown at them. While they waited, some left with their guardians to urinate in groups. The boys drank a little beer while the circumciser and his assistants entered a nearby hut where the boys were later taken. The hut was surrounded by a thatch fence. At the entrance, bamboo stalks formed an arch at waist level, requiring the men to crouch in order to enter. A pot with medicine (*yim*) was to the left of the entrance. Around the base of the pot was the mash from the beer. Two chicken heads were impaled on a bamboo stick in the fence. Their bodies were on the ground inside the compound. Before leaving, the circumciser's assistant cut two portions from the wings of the chickens and inserted them into a slit of the bamboo that was holding the chicken heads.

Mbagu, the circumciser, explained that one chicken would have been sufficient, but the mother of the first child offered two. He cut off the heads. If the chickens died covering their stomachs with their wings, it would be a bad

sign and mean that a man had used sorcery and ruined the saafi. The chickens died with their stomachs visible, which was a good sign.

Mbagu had eight assistants, several older than he, but still his apprentices. They were bare-chested for most of the activities. They argued among themselves occasionally as to proper procedure, questioning, for example, how many times a man or boy should be whipped.

After deciding what to do, they instructed the boys and their guardians to follow their example. A man went inside the compound and faced a second man who held a leaf and a feather to his forehead with his left hand. With his right hand, he held a bunch of leaves and brushed the back of the head of the other man outside, who did the same to him. At the same time, they leaned forward over a calabash of beer held by a third man, and, with much blowing and gesturing, drank a little of the beer through one of four reeds sticking out of the container. The inside man then dropped the leaf and feather. If one turned up and the other down, it forecasted good health. If both fell opened or closed, it would be a sign of bad things. The sign was good, and the men reversed positions and repeated the procedure. In case of a bad sign, the person would need medicine to remedy the prediction. After doing this to one another, each boy and his guardian did the same thing. Some smaller boys had to be lifted to reach the calabash of beer.

Mbagu said that the men touched each other's heads with leaves to divine their luck: the leaves were dropped to the ground, and the way they fell indicated whether a man would be healthy and have good luck, or whether he would not. One of the boys fainted during the proceedings. He was treated to the side by having water thrown on him, and the activities continued without him. The circumciser and his men slapped each other on their chests and backs at the same time. The boys were in a line with their guardians beside them, and nine men walked clockwise around the boys three times, slapping each of them each time.

Two small knives that had been used for the circumcision were buried in the mash at the base of the pot. The men took turns shooting an arrow, very lightly, into the buried mash until they hit the knives. This was done at the distance of about an inch, and most hit the target the first time. Next, a young, uncircumcised boy shot an arrow into the mash. He was subsequently brought forward to be whipped, and he started to cry. The men did not whip him hard. He was given the bow and arrow as a gift, and he will be the lead boy at the time of his circumcision.

He was followed by the guardians and their wards, who did the same thing. On succeeding, each shooter was hit on the head and back by the men pressing around. As with the entire afternoon's proceedings, this was done with great hilarity. Sometimes the guardians would hit back, and a couple of

guardians pretended to pull the bow all the way back, to the amusement of the onlookers. A man crouching on the other side of the fence made a sucking or smacking sound with his lips every time a guardian and a boy hit the blades with the arrow. The men whipped each other and then whipped the guardians and the boys. The boys were paired and whipped each other twice. They were encouraged to hit each other hard, and when one of the small boys got off a good blow, the men laughed loudly.

The boys were led to the river. Again, their eyes were supposed to be closed. They were followed by the saafi, and grass and dirt were thrown on the boys as before. At the river, the circumciser and his helpers built three arches of bamboo in the river. Only one boy passed under them, and he walked instead of being pulled through the water as I had seen at other circumcision ceremonies. The circumciser then threw the arches downstream. The boys and guardians were whipped by the circumciser and his men before the boys were taken back into the stream by their guardians and washed. Their leaf skirts were thrown downstream. After washing, the boys lined up on the river bank with their left foot in the river and their right foot on the shore. Then all were pulled out of the water simultaneously. The boys lined up to have their penises inspected. They were dressed in cotton cloths: a square cloth behind and an apron shaped cloth in front. The boys were led back to the village at 6 o'clock and entered a hut where they were to spend the night. The men blowing the saafi circled the hut. In the past, they would have played all night and men would throw water, dirt, and anything else at the hut to bother the boys. Beer was sold during the day but was provided free during the night. Dancing started around 9 o'clock and lasted all night.

The next morning, the boys were led outside the village and had their heads shaved. The circumciser first snipped a small portion of hair from the lead boy and wrapped the hair in leaves from a tree representing "peace," and the snippet was placed in the tree. After this first snippet, the guardians began to shave their boys' heads. The boys were then dressed with 10 to 20 strings of beads of the kind women wear around their waists. The beads were criss-crossed over the chests of the boys, and a few necklaces were also added. These beads reflect the role of the boy as "wife," and are borrowed for the ceremony from the guardians' wives.

The boys were led back to the village and entered a hut where they were to spend the night. There was a small opening at the base of this structure, and the circumciser crouched beside it. A short distance away, Bara stood with the women and called for the boys. The circumciser replied, "The boys may be lost," and he wanted to know how long they have been away. Bara replied, "Two or three months." Mbagu said he would look for them and pretended to search around the house. He then returned and said he thought he may have

found them. A foot protruded from the hole. Bara shouted back, "That is not my son!" A second foot appeared, and Bara said, "No, that is not my son." The third time a foot appeared, it was the foot of the lead boy, and everybody shouted, "Yes, that is my son!"

The ceremony that day was a duplicate of the one that ended the three-day circumcision period three months earlier. At that time, however, the boys were on a hill at a great distance, whereas this time it was reenacted very close to the women. The boys were brought out and told to sit in a line. Mbagu spit the special beer that was kept in the jar on the forehead and body of each boy. The circumciser and all the men walked past the boys, tapping them with sticks from the "peace" tree. The men were followed by the boys' mothers, their sisters, and their fathers' sisters, who also tapped the boys lightly with sticks and rubbed salt on their foreheads. They asked the boys for their names.

The boys' fathers had told the guardians what names should be used. A circumcision name had no definition or meaning. Most often the grandfather's circumcision name was given to a boy, and it made no difference whether the grandfather was alive or dead, but a father's name can be given if the father is dead. A boy could receive a circumcision name only after he had seen the saafi. However, if a man converted to Islam or Christianity, he rejected his circumcision name because it represented paganism.

The boys were then taken to be fed, and for the rest of the afternoon, the men drank beer and danced. At about 4 p.m., the boys were brought to the dancing area, and they danced in a circle several times. During this time, Mbagu moved about with leaves from the peace tree, spraying the crowd with beer from the special mixture that he used to spit on the boys. Dancing continued all night for the second straight night.

Early the next morning, the boys were dressed in white pants and shirts and taken to the lamido to be shown to him. Otherwise, the lamido had no official connection to the circumcision ceremonies. At the end of the ceremonies, the boys were taken to other men to be shown as well.

On returning to the village, they were given new outfits. Only one activity remained to conclude the transition rites. The next morning, the boys were made to lie face-down in a row until the afternoon. The boys then got up, but they were not allowed to see what went on. Their guardians held their hands over their wards' eyes while each boy took a sip of a mixture called *mvubam* (*mvúúɓa̰*m) ("made of beer"), consisting of *bam* (*ɓa̰*m) ("flowers of the thatch"), *siisirr* (*síísír*) "termite", and *yimbam* (*yimɓa̰*m), a medicine. As the initiate took a sip, he was beaten on the back by the men three times. This drink was a protection against the saafi, which the boys will see later on. The saafi contains powerful medicines which, if seen without protection, will make a person ill with constipation. The boys, still held by their guardians so

that they could not see, danced three times in a circle counter-clock wise, while men continued to beat them with sticks and blow the saafi. No women were supposed to see anything that was going on, but during the course of the ceremony, a few women passed some distance away. The men hooted at them to be gone. Obviously the sound of the saafi was noticeable to the women, who were secluded in the compound just off the dancing area.

When the circumcision ceremonies are finished, the guardian's wife makes beer and couscous for the boy, and he gives a gift of a cloth or a mat to her. For the boy to talk to her or for her to talk to him before this is done shows a lack of respect, and therefore they must wait until this is done. The men said that the boys are paid *lough* (*lóŋw*) ("to open the mouth") by everyone except the mother, her sister, and the father's sister. These women assist the boys by touching them with leaves and rubbing native salt on their foreheads, which is supposed to prevent bad luck. A mother also makes food for her son after the ceremony. Finally, the boys are shown the saafi and allowed to blow them.

The NN explain the reason for circumcision as custom or tradition. "Because our parents did it," was the typical response to the question of why males were circumcised. In fact, no explanation was needed; it was a "natural" and obvious practice that all boys had to undergo to become men, whether or not they partook in the other rites of passage. Would an uncircumcised man be allowed to marry? The idea that a man could marry without being circumcised was considered absurd. Women would refuse to have intercourse with him, and men his age would laugh at him. No one could recall a story or historical incident that might explain the operation. If a NN were uncircumcised, he would feel shame to have the head of his penis covered, one man said. Men also said that only men who have been circumcised can visit Geren, the spirit that resides on the mountain where the ancient NN chiefs are buried and from which the NN descended after their war with the Fulani, and later, the Germans. Boys were circumcised in middle childhood because they were then intelligent enough to retain the secrets they learn during the transition period. They have reached an age when they have come to honor and fear their mothers. Boys must also be of age to withstand pain without crying.

If a boy died before circumcision, he would be buried in the same fashion as a woman. If a boy died during the circumcision, his mother would be informed by a man turning over her grinding stone. She should then cry quietly, and the boys who were participating in the circumcision ceremony should not cry at all.

RITES OF PASSAGE: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

The linguistic and cultural complexity found in the northern Cameroon is extreme. Ranging from homogeneity to heterogeneity, it resembles New Guinea (see Barth 1987). A similar comparison applies to a consideration of the part migration played in trying to understand the historic sources of the NN ceremonies, whether they were diffused from a common source or whether they were adaptations to similar stimuli.

In an overview of New Guinea practices, Keesing (1998) pointed out:

> We need not assume that initiation rituals have been separately invented over and over again. They are part of a universe of ideas about male and female, purity and pollution, that extends across vast areas of New Guinea, from one coast to another. We can speculate that the motivation to adopt a pattern of male initiation from surrounding peoples has consistently been that it was a better way to make men out of boys—or, perhaps more precisely, that it was a way of making better men. (Keesing 1998:35)

In some cases, peoples living in the northern Cameroon share remarkably similar initiation rites to the NN. The Mundang, who live in the border area of southwestern Chad and northern Cameroon, circumcised groups of boys of similar in age to the NN, washed them in a river, and secluded them in an "initiation camp" where they were instructed by a few elders; they were forbidden to see women. The boys were whipped and frightened with strange sounds. They were then returned to their villages and dressed in new clothing (Schilder 1994:60-7). There were differences too. Unlike the NN, the Mundang told mystical stories of how the circumcision rituals began (Schilder 1994:67). Whereas the saafi were the secret to the sounds used to frighten NN boys, the Mundang boys were "confronted with the awe-inspiring world of masks" (Schilder 1994:61), which also distinguished them from their neighbors, such as the Mbum. Both the NN and the Mundang offered cases of boys being circumcised at hospitals, rather than at the riversides, and then being allowed to participate in the transition and incorporation rituals. Furthermore, whereas the NN circumcise to achieve adulthood, like the Gbaya and most other Adamawa peoples, similar to their Fulani neighbors in this respect (Burnham 1996:175), the Mundang recognize that circumcision draws a sharp boundary between their ethnic identity and their uncircumcised Tupuri neighbors (Schilder 1994:71).

The Dowayos, living north of the NN along the Nigerian border, replicate the historical experience of the NN of having been able to resist Fulani conquest by sequestering themselves in the mountains. Yet, their initiation rites (Barley 1983:103-6) vary in detail from the NN as much as their emphasis on ancestral skulls and the status given blacksmiths differs between the two societies. To complicate matters further, we find, for example, that other

societies in the region, such as the Dìì (Muller 2002) and the Gbaya (Vidal 1976) practiced female as well as male circumcision.

CONCLUSION

Van Gennep's original formulation of the rites of passage has attained a level of popularity and public knowledge to be considered a cliché (Turner 1977:53). The acceptance of van Gennep's ingenious sociological abstraction may stem from its combination of familiarity ("shock of recognition") and its strangeness ("culture shock"). The commonplace awareness of rites of passage in our own society, say at school ceremonies, weddings, and funerals, provide the source of recognition, largely because van Gennep has helped us see the structural regularity among them. The rites expose the significance of transitions from one social status to another. The NN boys were separated from their mothers, who initially were not supposed to know, and certainly not supposed to see what was happening to their sons during their three months of separation. After the circumcision, the boys appear at such a distance from their villages that the women were not even able to distinguish their own sons from the others. The insistence on manliness by not crying during circumcision or beatings, the lengthy separation from normal society while the ephebes learn the secrets of becoming adult NN, and the final shedding of a youthful identity was portrayed most vividly by the grass skirts and face coverings worn at Mayo Yari, which were then discarded by the boys before they were dressed in adult clothing and welcomed back to their community.

At the same time, the age of circumcision and the brutality were shocking, although we can recognize similar features in comparing it to hazing in American society. (Applebome 2012). The sociological, cultural, and psychological significance of rites of passage appear to be of such importance to individuals and the societies of which they are a part that it is tempting to see them as necessary to the well-being and stability of the human condition. In discussions of the persistence of hazing, there have even been suggestions that this rite of admission to special groups is "hard wired" in some evolutionary sense (Hoover 2012).

In the 1960s adolescent male NN were circumcised, but not all of them had undergone the initiation rituals because they were regarded as pagan practices. Furthermore, although circumcision itself can be interpreted as an important marker in the passage to adulthood, as a point of comparison, the Ijo (or Ijaw) living in the central part of the Niger Delta in Nigeria traditionally performed circumcision on male infants with almost no rites of passage occurring until the end of life, when a complex of funeral ceremonies was performed (Hollos and Leis 1989:68).

During the decade following the independence of the Cameroon in 1960, the Fulani occupied the administrative roles in the government structure that placed them in ostensible control of Galim and the lamido. As I pointed out (Leis 1970), the NN had won the battle against the Fulani invaders in the previous century by successfully defending themselves but had lost out during the German and French colonization period by adopting the Fulani trappings of power at the level of the lamido and by accepting Islam and Fulfulde into their lives. This process of Fulbeization (Schultz 1979, 1984; Gausset 1999) could well have been facilitated by the rites of passage. Whereas circumcision could be used as a marker, as in the Mundang-Tupuri case (Schilder 1994), to separate populations, the contrast did not exist between the NN and the Fulani. In explaining their circumcision ceremonies, the NN made mention of only minor differences between their rites and those performed by the Fulani.

Of most significance to my thesis are Kjelsvik's observations on Nzaa identity. Contrary to expectation, the NN change of name to Nizaa was not predictive of a path to full assimilation with their former Moslem adversaries. The name change, such as it was, reveals quite a different dynamic. First, the name Nizaa was not an "invention" (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) in the sense of its having been born after my investigation. The singular mention of "Nizohk," that seemed an anomaly to me, should be written as Nizaa orthographically, according to Kjelsvik (personal communication). Second, the demographic change from one person vaguely identifying as Nizaa to the majority of the population turned out to be a form of resistance to assimilation and a resurgence of ethnic identity. Whereas Nyam-Nyam was an acknowledged Fulfulde word, used by them in a demeaning way, public reference to its historic name and to the name Nizaa came to be seen as a proud self-identifier.

On a macro-cultural level, like rites of passage, the importance of ethnic identity, with its implications for psychological, political, and economic functions, appears to have a logic that in some way may be connected to the human condition. On a level of analysis peculiar to the nation, the changing political scene in the Cameroon in the 1980s that diluted the Islamic political and religious preferences promulgated during President Ahidjo's term of office in the previous two decades (Burnham 1996:169; Gausset 1999:269; Schilder 1994:177; Kjelsvik 2008:132) delimited reasons for minorities to assimilate. For the Nyam-Nyam/Nizaa in particular, there was also what might be called the ethnographer observer's effect, courtesy of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle. The presence of ethnographers such as Theil (Endresen), Kjelsvik, and myself, gave unequivocal endorsement to the NN ethnic value.

The potential disappearance of the Nyam-Nyam language was partly due to its being an oral language only. In the 1980s, Rolf Theil (Endresen)

analyzed the language and devised an alphabet (Kjelsvik, personal communication). By the 1990s the Norwegian Missionary Society and the Nizaa language project developed a body of literature in Nizaa, such as health pamphlets, a book to teach Nizaa to French speakers, and the Bible translated into Nizaa (Fay Family 2010).

The NN/Nizaa may have lost their circumcision rituals, but they never lost the importance of their history of resistance to being conquered by Fulani or European colonizers, which has provided them with a continuing sense of recognition for themselves and to others in Cameroon society. The play or entertainment factor involved in the initiation rituals, as typically found elsewhere (La Fontaine 1986:181), has taken the form of an annual festival. "Le festival Nyem Nyem" was reported on Cameroon Radio and Television in 2009 (CRTV 2009) as attended by nearly 3,000 people and repeated three years later (Wanjiim 2012) to celebrate the "résistance héroïque" to German troops and Fulani cavalry in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The disappearance of initiation rites, which Eliade (1958) considered a corollary of the modern world, to the extent that it represents a shift from the emphasis on the family to the community at large, has been replaced, as predicted in Kimball's (1960) introduction to the universality of van Gennep's rites of passage, by the technological facilitation of the internet and television that promote a revived particularism of ethnicity in a time of globalization.

NOTES

1. I am grateful to the National Science Foundation for its support during 15 months of research in the Cameroon in I965–'66. Dr. Bjørghild Kjelsvik has been enormously helpful by carefully reading this paper, and with her linguistic and cultural observations. I also thank Helena Fox for her many useful editing suggestions. The final essay, of course, is my responsibility.

2. Institut de Recherches Scientifiques du Cameroun, 1965 (hand written copy).

3. Census Registry, Tignere, 1965 (hand written copy).

4. Since a Nizaa alphabet originated after my research, I placed in parentheses the newer orthographic spelling provided by Kjelsvik (personal communication). For a linguistic description of Nyam-Nyam/Nizaa see Endresen (1990/1991) and Kjelsvik (2002, 2008).

5. Names of homesteads and personal names are pseudonyms.

6. The 100 francs was then equivalent to roughly $.39, the cost of a pack of cigarettes. Daily wages for a laborer were 140 to 200 francs.

7. Perhaps for the young boys, the welts on their backs and chests would distract from the pain of their circumcisions.

8. Thinking the boys wore leaves to suggest that this was an old custom for war, one man replied that, obviously, the boys were dressed so that they would not be naked.

9. Van Gennep referred to "rites de marge," or the liminal rites, to denote a passage from one state to another. His focus was more on the patterned relationship between the stages than on the lack of order during the liminal period" (Zumwalt 1988:25). Turner (1974), however, emphasized that "symbols designate temporary antinomic liberation from behavioral norms and cognitive rules. This aspect of danger requiring control is reflected in the paradox that in

liminality, extreme authority of elders over juniors often coexists with scenes and episodes indicative of the utmost behavioral freedom and speculative license" (Turner 1974:273). The description of the NN liminal intercession appeared to be more in keeping with an ordered pattern than with the freedom described in Turner's analysis.

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