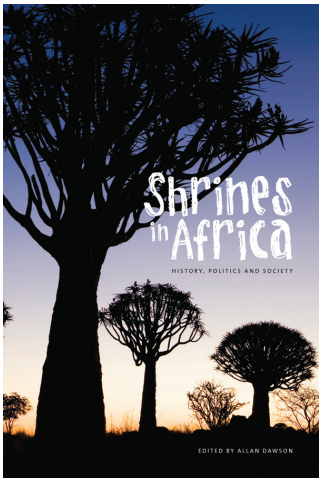

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Pots, Stones, and Potsherds: Shrines in the Mandara Mountains (North Cameroon and Northeastern Nigeria)

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ABSTRACT

In pre-colonial times the Mandara mountains were home to numerous small-scale societies practising varied economies and at varying levels of social complexity. Case studies that monitor varieties of shrines and their uses in the petty chiefdom of Sirak, in a larger Sukur chiefdom that specialized in iron making, and in Gudur, which we interpret as a ritual paramountcy, show that the division of ritual labour tracked but did not parallel that of labour in general. In a religious context characterized by a distant high god and omnipresent spirits and in an environment subject to repeated but unpredictable natural disasters and, in recent centuries, exposed to raiding by plains states, ritual specialists came to serve multiple communities. One cluster of communities, created by a diaspora from Gudur, relied on a chief, Bay Gudal, for protection from natural disasters and to ensure their fruitfulness and that of their animals and crops. Study of Gudur shrines and traditions throws light on the nature of the diaspora and indicates that this chief's roles included those of priest, rainmaker, and diviner but that his power was limited in practice, if not in the perception of diasporan communities whose distance favoured its mythical exaggeration. The study of shrines not only documents the familial

roots of political power and the importance of considering shrines' congregations for understanding historical process, but, in a reversal of received views, reveals Gudur as a less complex ritual and political entity than Sukur.

Keywords: Sirak, Gudur, Sukur, Mandara mountains, Cameroon, ancestors shrines.

> Les pratiques religieuses de la plupart des populations non-islamisées du *Mãdara* [Mandara], sont caractérisées par un trait commun : la représentation par des pierres polies et des *bourmas* (ou poteries) d'êtres auxquels on rend un culte. [de Lauwe 1937:54][1]

INTRODUCTION

It is not surprising to anyone who has walked the paths of the Mandara mountains that de Lauwe's attention was drawn to sacred pots. For these pots are not all kept in the darkened recesses of a shrine room or beneath a granary: some are left upon the tombs of their former owners; some are tucked into rock outcrops to protect against dangerous spirits, and others are reused for secular purposes or abandoned. Nearly seventy years after de Lauwe's visit to the region, the tradition of sacred pots, potsherds and stones continues even though diminished by the influences of Islam and Christianity. In this paper we follow de Lauwe's lead in analyzing in a regional and comparative perspective those artefacts and ecofacts that are the "material focus of religious activities" and thus are shrines according to van Binsbergen's minimal definition (cited by Colson 1997:47).

The region with which we deal is not the Mandara mountains as a whole but that part of it within which communities are found that, in whole or in part, claim connections usually of descent to Gudur, reputedly a major religious centre (Fig. 1). In discussing Gudur we make use of Kopytoff's (1987) concept of the internal African frontier, considering Gudur as, in his terms, a "metropole," but in a broader sense the whole Mandara mountain area can be considered as a frontier within which, as innumerable oral traditions insist, people have for centuries been migrating at various scales to found new communities and to merge and abandon old ones. It is this frontier process that underlies the cultural similarities that we have earlier described in terms of montagnard participation in

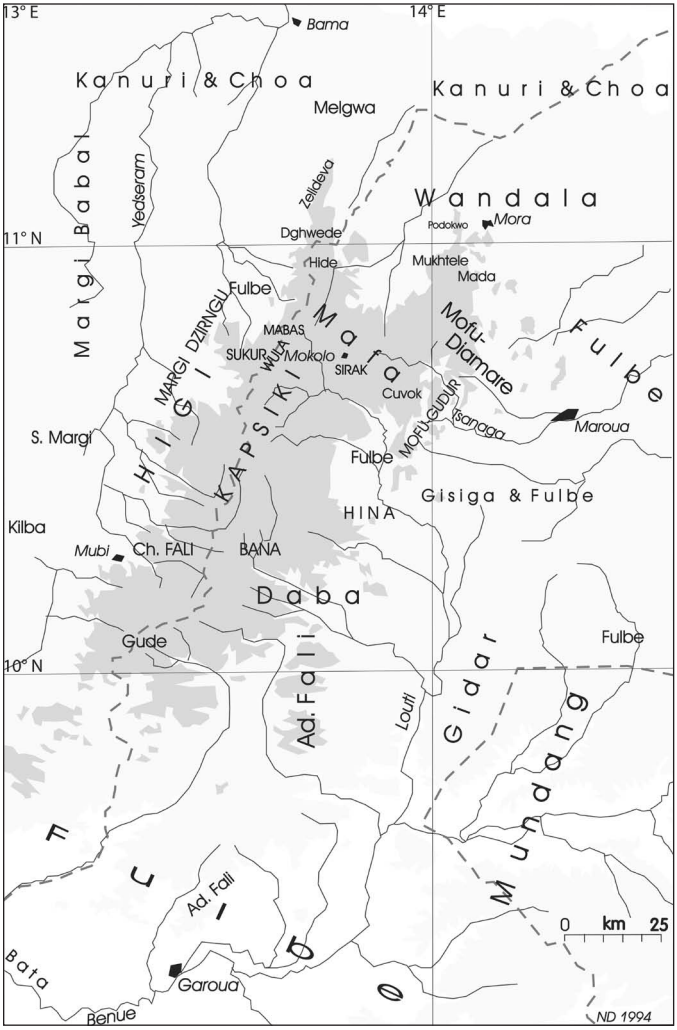

Fig. 1. Map of the Mandara mountain area of Nigeria and Cameroon showing selected communities and ethnic groups, towns and rivers. Capital letters indicate those groups of which a substantial part claims descent from Gudur. While certain Mafa chiefs and rainmakers including those of Soulede, Vreke, and Mudukwa claim Gudur descent, this does not appear to be generally true of this large ethnic group. The same can be said of the Daba and Gude.

a common symbolic reservoir (David and Kramer 2001:206–18; Sterner 1992).

We shall argue first that in the numerous small-scale montagnard societies of the region the division of ritual labour is closely related to that of labour in general and to social complexity. However before proceeding we should clarify the context of our observations. By the late twentieth century an earlier system of interaction with the spirit world had become much attenuated by "modernization," the growth of markets and towns populated by practitioners of Islam and Christianity, and the mission-based spread of Christianity to the countryside in which the majority of the population continues to live. Nonetheless, despite the competition of world religions, local religions and ritual, though practised now primarily by those, mainly elders, who have not been exposed to Western-style education, survive and, together with the historical evidence provided by ethnographers and others, provide a substantial basis for inference. Thus we can state that, in the pre-colonial period, which here ends in 1902, Mandara montagnards practised a religion that combined belief in a distant high god and numerous spirits with whom they established contact through various material foci, stones and pots being the most common. The spirit world was populated by ancestors and a vast variety of other spirits: of places, those of mountains and water points (wells, springs, pools) being among the most important, of crops, diseases, of one's own doppelganger soul, and many others. Contact with these spirits, which often took the form of an offering or sacrifice and a negotiation in the general manner described by Kopytoff (1971), took place both according to a ritual calendar and on other occasions when need arose. In both situations divination was often practised, sometimes by the person responsible for the cult but often by specialists. Divination determined an auspicious time for the ritual, if necessary the spirit to which the ritual should be addressed, and the nature of the offering and form of the rites, which often comprised a magical component. Thus divination, communication with spirits through shrines, and magic were inseparably linked. It was only in the period following World War II and especially since independence in 1960 that this system of beliefs and practices was seriously challenged by the extension of the power of the state and the modernizing influences noted above.

The original field material presented here is drawn mainly from Sterner's research at Sirak (between 1986 and 1990) and that of Sterner and David at Sukur (between 1991 and 1996) and most recently at Gudur

(2004). An earlier paper (David and Sterner 1999) sketches the nature of the Sirak and Sukur polities and these are described in greater detail by Sterner (2003), and Sukur also by David and Sterner (1995, 1996). Gudur is best known from the work of Seignobos (1991a), a human geographer with long and wide experience of northern Cameroon, and Jouaux (1989, 1991). In an ethnographic present located in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Sirak is best described as a petty priest-chiefdom and Sukur as a chiefdom committed to a village iron-smelting industry. Seignobos characterizes Gudur as a theocratic chiefdom and Jouaux hesitates between chiefdom and kingdom. Our recent research there led us to identify it rather as a form of ritual paramountcy exercised by the chiefdom of Gudal over a group of petty chiefdoms mostly speaking the same *mofu-gudur* language and collectively known as the Mofu-Gudur (David in press). Despite these differences and although, unlike Sirak, both Sukur and Gudur exerted, to a lesser and greater extent respectively, an influence over certain of their neighbours, the cultures of all three polities resemble each other much more than they differ.

In what follows we have omitted much ethnographic detail on ceramics that can be found in our earlier publications (David 1990; David et al. 1988; Sterner 1989a,b, 1992, 1995, 2002, 2003; Sterner and David 2003) and those of others (e.g., Barreteau, Sorin and Mana 1988).

SIRAK

> Before there were pots, the ancestors 'resided' in stones and when beer was offered to them it just rolled off their backs. But in a pot the beer remained just like in a person's stomach.[2]

Sirak, while considerably smaller than Gudur and most other Mandara mountain communities, comprises the same basic elements: there is a chief and six clans whose ancestors came from different settlements, Gudur being one, and decided to be "as brothers." And as at Sukur, Gudur and among many other groups, there are two castes – farmers and smith/potters (Sterner and David 1991). Men of the latter caste are responsible for funerals and other ritual activities, including a near monopoly on

divination; the women monopolize pot-making and may be engaged in the rituals associated with the vessels they produce.

Some twenty-one distinctively named and differently decorated pot types are made for use as shrines. The categorization of shrine types below, developed in cognizance of Mather's (1999:79) classification of Kusasi (Ghana) shrines, emphasizes the nature of the spirits and of the social entities or "congregations" that serve and are served by the shrines.

Household shrines

Shrines held within households have diverse associations and functions. They contain potent and dangerous spirits, including those of the household's ancestors and others that are the "property" of or are associated with individual family members.

Ancestor shrines

The most common shrine pots at Sirak are those made after the end of the period of mourning to contain the spirit of an ancestor (Fig. 2). The holder or custodian of such a pot must have living siblings or descendants on whose behalf he or she makes specified sacrifices. When a man dies it is his eldest surviving son (or daughter if there are no sons) who will have this responsibility. A senior man will serve the cult of his father, his father's father, and his father's mother, all represented by pots that are kept in a special small room in his house.[3] A youngest son (or daughter) keeps the pot of his mother in his senior wife's kitchen. Annual sacrifices, as well as sacrifices undertaken upon the advice of a diviner who is a member of the smith/potter caste, are made at these ancestor shrines on behalf of the descendants. Children who do not inherit responsibility for their parents' shrines may use a piece of quartz or a potsherd to make their own offerings.

It is not uncommon for an immigrant of many years to participate in the ceremonies of his new community, but to continue within the confines of his home to use the ancestor pots of his natal village and conduct the rituals in the style of his former home. This and other evidence indicates that montagnard emigrants also take their ancestor pots and certain other shrines with them when they emigrate to found new communities or join others already established.

Fig. 2. Sirak shrines: from right to left, father, father's father, and damaged father's mother pots, left in their small room in an abandoned house.

Other potent spirits

The most common shrine in this category is that of the spirit associated with millet and sorghum. This shrine consists initially of a piece of quartz usually kept beneath the head of household's primary granary. The householder makes sacrifices at this shrine several times a year, often after consultation with a diviner who may recommend the sacrifice of a particular animal or for a granary pot to be made to house the spirit.

Pot shrines relating to hunted leopards and the spirits of men killed in war represent another category of potent spirits that require placation; these exist now only as heirlooms and memories.

Upon the birth of twins, who are regarded as both fragile and dangerously potent, a set of pots comprising a small beer jar and a bowl is made for each twin.[4] After a first sacrifice, others must be made annually in

conjunction with the village-wide purification ceremony. On this occasion the parents, the twins and other close relatives assemble in the kitchen. Beer is poured into each twin pot and bowl, and over the twins themselves. This is essential not only for the well-being of the twins and their family but for the entire community.

Personal shrines

Unlike among the Mafa, Sirak do not possess a personal soul pot. However, the placenta is conceptualized as the baby's double and as having a soul that requires some attention. Placentas are buried beneath an upturned pot, pierced for the passage of the spirit. A woman's flour storage pot is used for a girl baby's placenta and a man's tripod meat cooking pot (legs removed) for a boy's.[5] These pots, located behind the mother's room and outside the house wall, are left in place so long as the compound is occupied.

Gawula, the biennial male initiation ceremony, commemorates the attainment of elder status. Not every man will be initiated, for he must already be married, he must have another candidate as a partner, and his older brother(s) must have already been initiated. Each initiate receives a large jar used to serve beer to the other initiates once it has been consecrated with an offering of flour and water. When the owner dies it is placed on his tomb with a hole knocked in the base.

Many heads of households possess a pot known as the "shrine of tears" that is used to maintain harmony in the household. After an initial offering overseen by the smith/diviner, beer from this pot is shared with the household head's children; subsequent offerings are made after consultation with a diviner. The wife of an elder may have an equivalent vessel.

Clan shrines

As the generations pass, male ancestors cease to be pots but are replaced by potsherds or pieces of quartz placed in clan sites, thus becoming elements in collective shrines served by the senior clan elder. The chiefly clan has a shrine atop the mountain where members of this clan formerly lived – it consists of pots that contain the spirits of leopards and enemies slain by clan members. In this shrine there were the remains of several such vessels, fragments of small bowls that had originally covered their mouths, and bones of sacrificial animals. In theory each clan has such a shrine.

Some, perhaps once all, clans also have (or had) pot shrines to protect their members against disease.

Both types of clan shrines occupy permanent sites. Sacrificial animals are killed, prepared, and eaten at the site, and cooking pots may be left nearby.

Nature spirit shrines

Some "wild" or nature spirits are localized, being associated with water points, trees, rock outcrops, mountains, or other sites. These spirits and the shrines associated with them are called *halalay*. Such spirits are easily offended, for example by persons committing adultery in their vicinity, and require placation. If a person falls ill after cutting down a tree, a diviner may recommend that a pot be made. The afflicted person then returns to the tree with the diviner and the potter. After drinking some beer, a mixture of beer and ground sesame is put in the pot, which is left beneath a rock. Another type of *halalay* keeps the water in wells from leaving. Before a new well is lined with granite slabs, the neighbourhood elder responsible makes a sacrifice that is subsequently repeated annually. *Halalay* sites may be further marked with upright stones.

Shrines that protect against spirits of disease are usually made for an individual and are not localized, although there is one shrine where pot necks are left and offerings made by those suffering from ear problems. Once near a path Judy Sterner came across a pot with an anthropomorphic head like a Mafa God pot that had been made for someone who had suffered a seizure.

Community shrines

It is characteristic of Sirak that community shrines are few and little emphasized. Judy Sterner knows of, but has not visited, one to which the chief goes to sacrifice to the spirit of the mountain on behalf of the larger community. Another elder prays for rain on behalf of the people of Sirak, and it would seem reasonable to describe the focus of his rites as a community shrine, but Judy Sterner has no personal knowledge of the shrine nor of him and his practice. In case of serious drought, appeal used to be made to the chief of Gudur.

Discussion

What is most characteristic of Sirak and many other smaller montagnard polities, including Mafa settlements (Müller-Kosack 2003), is that heads of households, while they may be assisted by diviners (generally of the smith/potter caste), are for the most part ritually self-sufficient and that individuals take considerable ritual responsibility for themselves. Clan rituals are not emphasized. In the annual rites of purification, it is not priests but the parents of twins whose ritual acts, undertaken independently within their scattered households, sum to provide protection for the community as a whole.

The consequences of (a) this substantial ritual self-sufficiency, and (b) a tendency – inferred rather than documented – for smith/potter caste diviners to suggest that their clients invest in a suitable pot through which to engage the spirit responsible for their situation, include a greatly elaborated set of shrines, here for the most part materialized as ceramic vessels, numerous examples of which are present in most households and can be found distributed widely through the community territory.

SUKUR

Sukur has the same social and cultural building blocks as Sirak and other communities – a chief, several clans, a potter/smith caste, and the use of pots and stones as shrines. But there are significant differences, for Sukur specialized in industry and trade and was in part dependent upon its neighbours for the raw materials necessary for iron-making. It has a chief with a reputation and influence extending beyond his community but at the same time relies for its rain upon a ritual specialist resident in neighbouring Wula. There are twenty-one clans, some including that of the chief with claims to Gudur origin, and an extended set of titleholders. The chief of Sukur initiates important ceremonies after divination by himself or another diviner – several past chiefs of Sukur were renowned diviners – however sacrifices and other offerings are made on his behalf by priestly titleholders.

Household shrines

Sukur ancestor pots are far less elaborate than those of Sirak; they are very small and normally undecorated, or may not even be pots. A small usually plain jar is the model for ancestor and most other shrine pots, and the process whereby it comes to represent the ancestor is somewhat different from at Sirak, here beginning in a vessel given to a young man at his initiation into adulthood. The general term for such shrines is *suku*, a term also applied to ancient lower grindstones (*tson*), commonly believed to be made by God, used for similar purposes (David 1998).

In theory ancestor shrines are served very much as at Sirak, but we have a strong impression that the cult of ancestors is less elaborate and is practised less frequently. A shrine that, by its name, *suku juk*, refers to a collectivity of lineage ancestors, may well not exist in actuality. If there are clan shrines at Sukur, we are not aware of them. As at Sirak the spirits of twins are considered powerful and potentially dangerous. The associated pots are nearly identical to those at Sirak, but rituals practised by the parents of twins do not, when summed together, protect the community.

Placentas are buried beneath upturned pots behind the mother's room and within the compound wall. A woman's first child receives a small plain jar. Every year during the purification ceremony, the mother offers a chicken and beer on the shrine. When the next child is born, the pot is passed on and is finally abandoned when all the children are grown and no longer in need of protection.

As at Sirak there are shrines for the spirits of men and leopards violently killed, but at Sukur these are not kept in the compound or in a clan shrine but rather in the owner's field outside the compound walls. Such shrines serve to protect the owner's farm and possessions from theft and other misfortunes. Every year the owner makes an offering of flour at planting, harvesting, and threshing. If a family member is ill or other misfortunes strike, a diviner may advise the sacrifice of a red cock. The potency of the spirits associated with such shrines is such that they are dangerous to pregnant women. For this and other reasons, an owner may decide to destroy it, an act that requires a sacrifice.

Nature spirit shrines

The nature spirits of Sukur are much like those described for Sirak. They are usually found at water points (springs, wells), rock outcrops, or craggy

Fig. 3. Grindstone-mortars of the kind frequently used as shrines at Sukur. These are located next to the council chamber in the northern sector of the chief's residence.

mountain tops, trees, or groves. These are the dwelling places of *hri*, a term referring both to the spirit and its shrine, which may include a pot or pots or one or more stones. *Hri* shrines are immovable in geographic space, whereas *suku*, even if rarely moved, are localized only in social space. Seven of the most potent are the sites of annual sacrifices that protect the entire community in a manner described below.

Community shrines

Zoku, the annual purification ceremony at Sukur, takes place at several locations and initiates a ritual cycle that takes place over subsequent months at a number of *hri* shrines served by titleholders with priestly functions. The cycle begins with sacrifice of a bull (nowadays a small goat) at a shrine at the base of great gate-like natural granite pillars atop Mixyrux hill. Although this is not made explicit, the Mixyrux shrine constitutes the religious heart of Sukur. The sacrifice is addressed both to the *genius loci* and to God. A free translation goes as follows:

> This offering is for God, may it bring health to the people, may they become as numerous as grains of magnetite ore. There, O spirit, is your food; the offering is the responsibility of my patriline, handed down by my father. The things that enter our houses through holes in the wall, let them be not as snakes but as earthworms on the path at our children's feet. Spirits, take your food, and bring health and prosperity to the people. Let the grains of millet be as grains of sand so that all may eat. Spirit of this high rocky place, drive evil things away from us, the people. So be it.

One of the priestly functionaries holding the *Mbesefwoy* title is responsible for this sacrifice. On the evening of the same day, two other titleholders leave the chief's house and walk through Sukur calling the ancestors to come. They carry a small pot of beer to a shrine on Muva mountain (the highest point in Sukur) where they make an offering to ancestors. The following day the spirits of the dead and those of impurity and disease are driven off beyond Sukur's borders by a ritual war party of titleholders.

Zoku is the first of seven sacrifices that take place over the next three months at different nature spirit shrines. They are made by *Mbesefwoy* and

other priestly titleholders on routes into and out of Sukur, at sites where powerful nature spirits reside.[6] Strips of goatskin are hung across the paths to bar the entry of evil forces. Upon completion of the cycle, Sukur is ritually sealed against spirit and other attacks.

Chiefly shrines

There are several shrines in and around the chief's house. Some of these take the form of small beer jars while others are grindstones and others again are gateways or gateway elements. These are all associated in various ways with the chieftaincy (see Smith and David 1995). One set of pots, for example, represents previous chiefs and is served by a titleholder, *Tlisuku*, who acts as the chief's chaplain.

A shrine named *Yawal De'ba* is associated with and has perhaps been appropriated by the chief of Sukur. *Yawal* is a ceremony held in February after the millet harvest at intervals decided by the chief. It celebrates his power and that of his clan but also the acquiescence and integration of past dynasties, representatives of which perform rituals at the shrine. This consists of three newly made pots, the principal being a tall narrow neckless storage vessel with three small horn-like spikes below the rim, which are set in a stone-lined pit.

Another shrine, located within the chiefly residence, celebrates Sukur's ritual seniority amongst its neighbours. This consists of a grindstone-mortar containing a number of ancient upper grindstones of an elongate shape quite unlike those used today. It is called the *tson vwad* or grindstone-mortar altar of the hairlocks. "Each of its stones represents one of the chiefdoms in the region to which the *xidi* [chief] sends … the *tlagama* title-holder to braid into the new chief's hair a lock … of his predecessor's" (Smith and David 1995:454).[7] This custom at one and the same time symbolizes the continuity of the chieftaincy and the ritual seniority accorded to Sukur by up to nine of their neighbours, including Gulak (Margi), Kamale (Higi), Wula and Mabas.

Although the Sukur rely primarily for their rain on the prayers of *Tluwala*, a rainmaker living in Wula with whom the chief deals through emissaries, there is a rain shrine in Sukur located not far from the chief's residence and close to *Yawal De'ba*. It is called the *suku yam* (shrine of water) and appears to serve as a first line of defence in the event of interruptions in the rains. Its story and the associated ritual practices relate it

Fig. 4. A priestly titleholder offers beer at the Yawal De'ba shrine in Sukur.

to Gudur and may indicate that it is a community shrine that has been subsumed under the chief's authority.

While there are other shrines associated with the chief, they can all be comprehended within the framework developed above, except for *hri Mcakili*, a stone (perhaps a grindstone-mortar) kept hidden beneath a granary cap. *Mcakili* (or *Mpsakali*) is the Sukur name for Gudur. The shrine is located next to the chief's megalithic throne in the ceremonial area outside his residence. Every year, before the main harvest in December, the chief makes an offering here. It is said that long ago if locusts and leopards were a problem this offering consisted of beer and a sorghum paste, the latter obtained from Gudur.[8] Thus this shrine is a material statement of the chief's claim to Gudur descent and a special relationship with its chief. Such ritual legitimation of his authority is all the more needed in view of the long sequence of depositions and abdications of Sukur chiefs (see http://www.sukur.info/Soc/Xidis.htm).

Discussion

Sirak and Sukur share essentially the same belief system but at Sukur, while heads of households and lineages retain ritual responsibility for their ancestors, specialists, in the form of priestly titleholders such as the six *Mbesefwoy*, act on behalf of the community in the purification and in other ceremonies, including initiation, and the chief's ritual responsibilities are devolved to *Tlisuku*. Ceramics are less important as shrines at Sukur than at Sirak, partly because the wives of smiths, who worked with their husbands to fine bloomery iron for sale at Sukur's iron market, produced pots in lesser quantities and lower quality. Diviners rarely suggest that their clients commission pots and far more frequently advise their clients to place various kinds of offerings, some of which they provide, at crossings of ways. Thus, although there may be as many shrines per person as at Sirak, ceramic ones are certainly fewer.

Community-wide ritual action is always initiated by the chief and is never achieved incrementally by the additive actions of individual householders. Unlike the similar Sirak *halalay*, several of the Sukur *hri* shrines combine, in a cycle coordinated by the chief, to protect the entire community. Delicate political adaptations are evident; the chief cannot dismiss the *Mbesefwoy* and other priestly titleholders responsible for the ritual defence of the polity.

A dimension not present at Sirak is evident in the *tson vwa'd* shrine that links Sukur to its neighbours while claiming a ritual seniority that, at least until very recently, appears to have been generally acknowledged though not, according to our sources, on the basis of a Gudur origin of Sukur's chiefly dynasty. However this may be, a legitimacy based on Gudur descent is claimed by the present clan Dur chiefly dynasty in the rituals associated with the *suku yam* rain shrine and, more forcefully, in the *hri Mcakili* shrine, where the appellation *hri* seems to insist on a direct connection between Gudur and Sukur mediated by a nature spirit.

GUDUR

Gudur is not as easily defined as Sirak or Sukur and has meant many things to many people at different times. The name can refer to a clan, a physical space, a regional shrine, the single small chiefdom of Gudal, or

a more complex chiefly entity comprising the chiefdoms of, from north to south, Ndeveley, Kilwo, Mambay, Gilvawa, Gudal, Minglia (Mangezla), Mokong, Katamsa, Dimeo, Mofu (Mafaw), Mosso (Maaca'b), Zidim, and Njeleng, this last being the only unit that is not *mofu-gudur*-speaking (Fig. 5). Masakal in the northeast and Mawuldal to the west are usually included within Gudur, and Mowo, to the east, is also closely associated. These three communities speak *mofu-gudur* but have strong links respectively with the Mofu-Diamaré, the Cuvok, and the Gisiga. The larger Gudur political entity is characterized by Seignobos (1991a) as a theocratic chiefdom, by Jouaux (1989) as something between a chiefdom and a kingdom, and by ourselves as a group of small chiefdoms that acknowledge one of their number, Gudal, as ritually paramount.[9] We all agree that at some time or times in the past Gudur was the point of origin of a diaspora that reached across the Mandara mountains and even down onto the edges of the plains to the west (Fig. 1). Seignobos (2000a:46) now sees this movement, which he regards as part of a much larger pattern of northeast to southwest migration (Seignobos 1991b), as dating to the eighteenth century and involving Gudur colonization of lands to the west.[10] Jouaux is noncommittal about both date and process. We differ from Seignobos and argue that the main diaspora from Gudur westwards took place in the mid-nineteenth century as a result not of an *expansionist policy* but of the substantial *defeat* of Gudal and its neighbours by the Fulbe, then engaged in the jihad initiated by Usman Dan Fodio. With the hills in Mofu-Gudur territory already densely populated, Gudur, and particularly Gudal, occupants of the plains and lower slopes would have been especially at risk and liable to flee before the onslaught of Fulbe cavalry. It is possible to place this process in the 1830s–1840s on the evidence of Mohammadou's (1988:125–27) history of the Fulbe chiefdom of Gazawa (east of Gudur) who (re-)established themselves at Gazawa around 1820, from which time on Gudur would have been under more or less continuous attack until its various elements were either defeated or had come to an accommodation with the Fulbe.[11]

Igor Kopytoff's *African frontier* thesis provides a framework for understanding Gudur's regional significance, for many of the polities of the Mandara mountains constitute a

> local frontier, lying at the fringes of the numerous established African societies. It is on such frontiers that most African

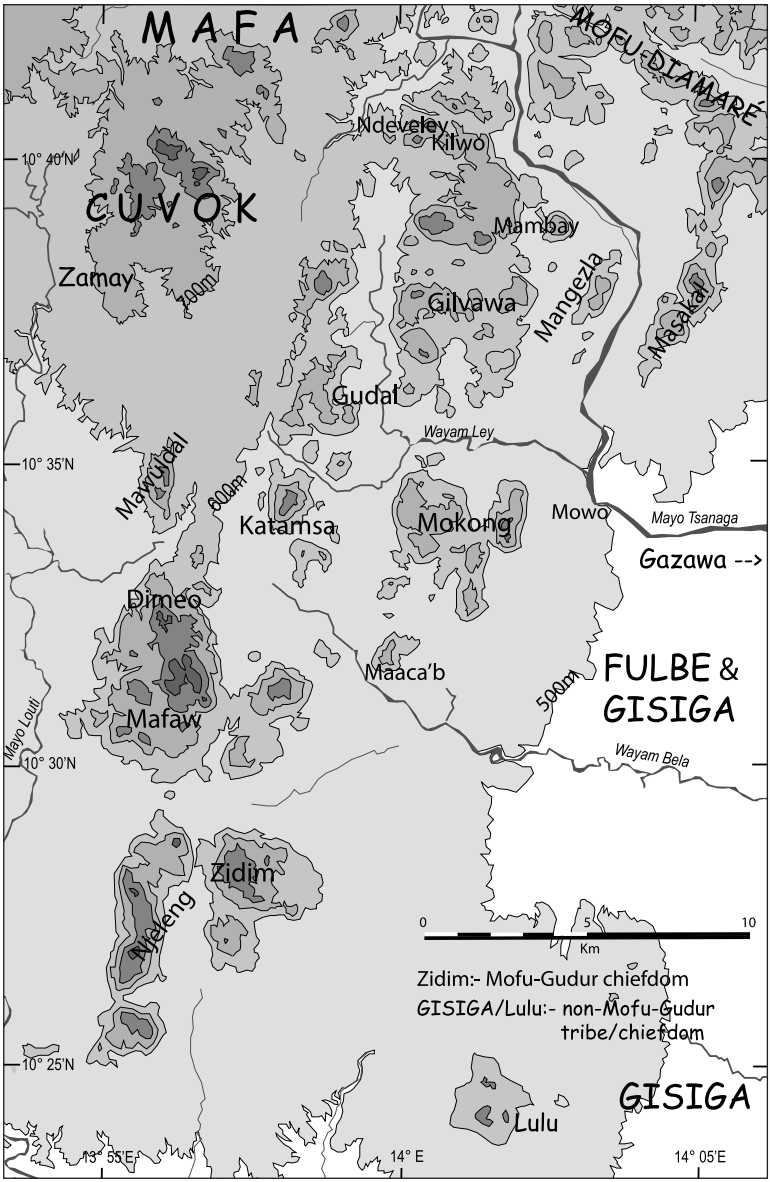

Fig. 5. Gudur, showing its component chiefdoms [and nearby communities mentioned in the text].

> polities and societies have, so to speak, been 'constructed' out of the bits and pieces – human and cultural – of existing societies. This posits a process in which incipient small polities are produced by other similar and usually more complex societies. (1987:3)

Following Kopytoff (1987),[12] we can consider Gudur as a centre or "metropole" from which the frontier process began with the creation of "frontiersmen," people who because of Fulbe attacks and locusts (Lavergne 1943) left their home settlement on the advice of "Ngom," supposedly the ninth chief of the Gudal line but in fact the first who can be solidly situated in history. This placed them in an "institutional vacuum" where they "begin a process of social construction that, if successful, brings into being a new society" (Kopytoff 1987:25). This "re-institutionalization" takes place on a frontier that is not necessarily a geographical vacuum, for the immigrants often encounter others that share many similarities in culture, language, and material culture. The immigrants either join an existing group on the frontier or establish their own society, one that is constructed "not out of whole cloth but from a cultural inventory of symbols and practices that were brought from a metropole and that pre-dated any particular society being observed" (1987:34).

In the present instance, Gudur migrants, moving in small contingents towards the west, would have risked capture and enslavement by other montagnards. The Mayo Tsanaga valley and that of its tributary, the Mayo Goudoulou, offered the easiest axis of penetration by Fulbe raiders, and so the inhabitants of these valleys, disproportionately Gudal and of Gudal clan, would have been the most likely to have been displaced westwards. When seeking refuge amongst the inhabitants of the area, it would have been very much in their interest to emphasize their value as warriors and farmers, and to talk up their connections with a chief possessing the power to control plagues and other misfortunes and to ensure the fertility of humans and their stock. Rather than founding their own settlements, they frequently joined others, whence the widespread existence at Sirak, Sukur, and among the Kapsiki, Higi and other groups, of clans that claim Gudur origins and others that do not. The lack of Gudur metropolitan knowledge of the diaspora fits well with this reading of history, as does the absence of Gudal participation in the installation of chiefs of the diaspora polities and the general lack of special relationships between diaspora communities.

The new and growing communities so formed would have had, according to Kopytoff, to validate themselves to themselves as well as to other polities in the region. Self-validation in the discourse of the Mandara implies establishing ancestry, in this case exotic but nonetheless honourable. Validation vis-à-vis others entails having a "charter that drew upon widespread regional values, themes and traditions, and upon historical events and memories that carried prestige in the region as a whole" (Kopytoff 1987:72). The migrants from Gudur would have worked hard to advance the claims of Gudur to embody such a charter. And so many clans came to claim direct or indirect Gudur descent and to believe that their communities' well-being might be ensured by their leaders' access to the powers of Gudur's chief. As van Beek (1981:118) astutely observed "one can claim a Gudur origin on account of the ritual importance of that village, and not because one really is of Gudur stock." It was not enough, however, just to claim a Gudur origin; it was also necessary – at least in theory – to return on occasion to "recharge" rain-making paraphernalia, receive new medicines, or seek protection from locusts or renewed fertility and fecundity. Such journeys to Gudur are better remembered on the periphery than at the centre.

At both Sirak and Sukur we were told of envoys who had journeyed to Gudur bearing gifts for the chief of Gudal, in return for which they obtained protection from leopards, disease, drought, and especially locusts. Indeed, it was in the 1930s, during a catastrophic set of locust invasions, that the last envoys went from Sukur to Gudur. What was it that they found? What shrines did they visit?

Household, clan, community and nature spirit shrines

Little has been written of these shrines at Gudur, and during our two-month stay we learned of them only incidentally. The range of ancestor pots described by Barreteau et al. (1988) is similar to that of Sirak, and, as at Sirak, a special room in the compound is built to house them. On Gilgam mountain we visited a collective shrine where chiefly ancestors of the Masacavaw clan were represented by decorated jars (Fig. 6). There and elsewhere our attention was drawn to *halalay*, which here are clan shrines – perhaps with aspects of nature spirit shrines – usually located in sacred groves. We know also of shrines where the earth priests, often but not always members of clans considered as autochthonous that have lost or

ceded political leadership to later-comers, carry out sacrifices on behalf of the community. Thus the present *Maslaslam*, earth priest of the Ngwadaama clan, informed us that his ancestor had ceded the chieftaincy of what was to become Gudal to Biya (otherwise known as Bi Dilgam or Nguéleo), the first Bay (chief of) Gudal, who had arrived from Mowo bringing with him salt, a common symbol of civilization (see also Seignobos 1991a:237). Mowo, located only eight kilometres to the east, appears to have been an earlier magico-religious centre that, likely under pressure from the plains states of Wandala and Bagirmi, lost its ritual pre-eminence, its shrines and ritual being dispersed, some to Gudal and others to Mofu-Diamaré settlements (Seignobos 1991a, 1995).

All in all it would seem that the household, clan, and community shrines at Gudur – and in other chiefdoms of the group – differ only in details from those of Sirak and Sukur. We are ignorant as to the functions of nature spirit shrines, which surely exist. However, our limited investigation of titleholders' duties does not suggest that there are any equivalents to the *Mbesefwoy* or *Tlisuku* nor anything comparable to the ritual circumscription of Sukur, sealing it against exterior physical and spirit attack.

Chiefly shrines and chiefly divination

When Biya arrived from Mowo by a roundabout route dictated by his bull, he brought with him rain stones. These, like the bull, had been bequeathed to him by the chief of Mowo whom he had been serving since he had arrived there as a boy from Wandala some years before. There are two types of rain stones: one kind brings rain and the other, named after the rainbow, stops it falling. These stones are kept in the chief's house in a tripod pot covered with the skin of a hyrax. The rain sacrifice for Gudal begins after divination by the chief of the smiths and an antelope has been hunted. It is inaugurated by four of the titleholders in the chiefly cemetery, one of whom addresses the ancestors. The party then moves to the chief's house where he sacrifices the animal in the presence of the rain stones, quite possibly anointing them with its blood. We were told by our Gudur assistant that the last time this had happened was in the late 1950s.

Whereas this ritual has all the aspects of one carried out on behalf of the community by and under the auspices of the chief, sacrifices for rain on behalf of other communities would appear to have been conducted by the chief in his house either alone or at least without the formal